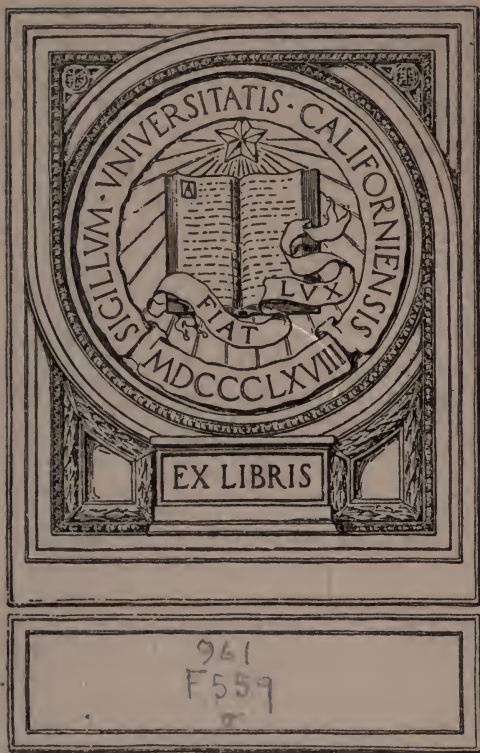


THE ONE OUTSIDE



MARY FITZ-PATRICK



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THE ONE OUTSIDE

THE ONE OUTSIDE

AND OTHER STORIES

BY
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POPULAR EDITION

UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

MAUNSEL & CO., LTD.
DUBLIN AND LONDON

1915

NO. 1180
AMSTERDAM

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The One Outside

I

THE small railway station at Rathcoole was looking its best that fine summer evening. Its lime-washed walls, all day a blinding dazzle of white in the steady glare, were now flecked here and there with cool, reposeful shadows, and here and there veiled with a rich, transparent, amber glow, flushing to warm rose-pink, as the great shining disc suspended above the grim battlemented hills that closed the horizon westward, dropped nearer their jagged edge through widening pools of saffron and crimson light. The riot of colour in the sunset sky grew every moment fiercer, the pink-and-gold walls of the low station buildings reddened responsively, then the little windows gleaming beneath the prim grey roofs, like bright eyes under a sober hood, blazed out suddenly on the listless platform, as though a lighted torch had been set in every flashing pane.

"One'd almost say 'twas illuminations they were makin' for him," Biddie M'Grane said to

herself, gazing anxiously down the line, for the express train she had come to meet was already a quarter of an hour overdue.

A middle-aged man in a decent frieze coat and new felt hat, betokening prosperity, stopped short at sight of the patient blue-cloaked figure, and accosted her in the manner of an old friend: "They tell me Mike is comin' home to you at last, Biddie. Is it expectin' him by this thrain you are?"

The woman's face lighted up strangely. "'Tis just that same, then, I'm doin', Barney Finnerty. And it's fair wore out I am waitin' here with the heart leppin' out of me mouth at every sound of rumblin' yondher. Sure the minutes do be crawlin' by like hours whin you're watchin' for a thrain. But them railway people care nothin' at all for a body's feelin's. They do be mindin' little but their own conveyniance."

"Thru for you, Biddie. But, afther all, what does that matther? Sure you've waited sixteen long years for Mike, and you ought to be gettin' used to patience by this time. A few minutes more or less can't signify much to you now."

The man spoke kindly, but with a shade of bitterness in his voice, bitterness entirely lost upon Biddie, as he well knew.

"Then, maybe it's just because I had to wait sixteen years I haven't one ounce of

patience left," she said with simple candour, turning her eyes away from him again towards where the glittering lines of rails became lost to sight between the banks of a deep cutting, tree-clad to the summit, and at this hour filled with happy flutterings of soft bird wings and tremulous with the rapture of their evensong.

The man watched her in angry silence. There was in his expression a curious blending of perplexity and pain. It was, doubtless, somewhat of a shock to find that, after the passage of twenty hard, life-furrowing years, he had not yet forgiven Mike M'Grane for stealing Biddie Murphy away from them that had the best claim to her—sons of well-to-do neighbours that had grown up next door, you might say, to her father's snug little farm. And such a fine girl as Biddie was in those days, with a pleasant word for everybody, and a laugh as sweet as the fluting of a thrush in spring: a fortune in herself to any man if she had never an acre of land at her back at all. She could have had her pick and choice of the best matches in the town-land of Rathcoole, but nothing would satisfy the foolish girsha but she must run off from them all with that good-for-nothing Mike M'Grane, and he only a poor day-labourer and a stranger to the place forbye. No wonder old Brien's heart broke soon after the marriage—a poor hole-and-corner one it was too—so set as

he had been on having a "warm" man for his son-in-law, a man like Barney himself, who could put good money into the land, which was what Brien had always most wanted.

Well, well, where was the good of blaming Biddie? 'Twas small comfort she got out of taking her own way. It would have been better for herself, maybe, if her choice had fallen on plain-faced Barney Finnerty. He would never have left her with three young children on her hands to go fortune-hunting in England. No, indeed, Rathcoole would have been good enough for him—Rathcoole and Biddie. Oh, saints in glory! what sort of man was Mike at all to leave a fine young woman to shift for herself on a lone farm, without word or token from him for the length of sixteen years? Any other wife in the world but Biddie would have turned the back of her hand to him for ever after such outrageous treatment, but she was like nobody else. And now here was Mike coming home as stiff as you please, and she—God help her!—you had only to look at the crathur's face to guess what sort of a welcome he'd get from her. Well, it's little welcome there'd be for him elsewhere; it's not in Rathcoole they'd be lighting bonfires for him—that much he, Barney Finnerty, knew, and would tell him too, if ever he got the chance.

By this time a glow of honest indignation

was shining through the tan of Barney's weather-beaten cheeks. It deepened perceptibly to an angry crimson as the tall, bowed figure stepped closer to the edge of the platform, bending forward in an attitude of strained expectancy, which, even to the man's rude perceptions, in some measure revealed and resumed the whole story of her widowed married life. The eyes watching her, from being fierce and resentful, softened gradually to an expression of pity and regret.

Oh, saints above ! If he had only been in Mike's place, 'twasn't that bend she'd be having in the back he remembered as straight and strong as the stem of a young oak ; nor would there be all these streaks of white waving through the blackness of her hair. For it was himself knew how she had come by them. It was just through slaving her soul out day and night to keep the roof over the young children's heads. Many a time, returning home late from a wedding or a wake, he had come upon her unbeknownst in the cornfield, reaping, strong and steady as a man, by the light of the harvest moon. She sometimes took her little boy with her for company, and he lay cradled like a king's son, lapped up snugly in the shelter of the dry sheaves. Maybe the sight of him gave her courage when she found her strength was failing, or the warm breathing of him took the lonesomeness out of the night.

Barney minded well the first time he caught her working there at that mischancy hour, and the creepy feeling that came over him at sight of the one solitary figure moving like a restless ghost through the silent moonlit field—here white as a shrouded corpse in the cleared spaces, where the corn lay flat against the ground like fallen ranks of slain fighting-men; there, flecked with wavering patches of shapeless darkness, where the tall stooks, standing up like tombstones in a lonely churchyard, flung strange fantastic shadows across the level stretches of silver-grey stubble at their base.

But it was no ghost at all he had to deal with, as he very soon saw to his cost when he stood, neighbour-wise, to bid her the time of night, for it would have seemed the height of ill manners to pass her by without a word. Biddie was of a different mind, however. She wanted none of his palaver, she declared ungratefully. 'Twas just a busybody he was, never happy unless he was meddling with other people's doings. Indeed, to hear her talk, he might have been the meanest old spy in Christendom.

“ ‘It's the whole counthry will be hearin' all about me in the mornin',” she had prophesied bitterly, but he could not help suspecting that her anger had no real bottom in it. For sharp as her tongue might be, her eyes—the blue eyes, faded now—remained as soft and kind as ever.

She kept scolding, scolding for no other reason than to leave him no time to say what he thought of Mike. Oh, the strange ways of women! And afterwards she repented some of the hard things she had said when she found he knew how to hold his tongue, for her secret never left the field. She even suffered him to help her one night in a rainy summer when skies were dark and threatening, and between them every sheaf was stooked before the big drops began to fall.

But all that was years ago, and times were changed since then. She had no need of his help now. The children were grown up tall and strong as the young trees in the wood yonder, and the strength of the three pairs of arms had already worked wonders on the stony-hearted little farm. Biddie's affairs were in a fine way of doing entirely. It was a strong, warm place Mike was coming back to—a snug corner for a man's old age. But there was one thing he'd miss, maybe, when he crossed the old threshold, and that was the brave, blooming young wife he had said good-bye to with such a light heart. No prosperity could bring her back now; she was dead and buried, and it was Mike M'Grane had killed her.

Something—a dimly-appreciated but sinister thread of meaning running through his thought—made Barney start uneasily. He took off his hat and, still watching Biddie, scratched his

head with great deliberation, as if to stimulate the sluggish movement of the brain within. In reality, this was only Barney's way of expressing doubt. Then he went up to the side of the waiting woman, with the awkward gait of a youth in his bashful teens.

"Is it just as well as you used to be you're feelin' this while back?" he asked. The sheepish inconsequence of the question might have provoked a smile but for the wistful concern trembling in his voice and shining out of his kind, honest eyes. Despite the habitual reticence that had become almost a religion to her, Biddie was betrayed into a momentary fit of candour.

"'Deed, then, Barney, I'm not just as well as I used to be," she answered, after a moment's pause. "I have a pain here often"—pressing her hand against her heart—"that plunges in sharp an' suddint like the sthroke of a knife in the dark. An' for awhile I do be that suffocated I can scarcely draw me breath. But it goes away—Glory be to God that sint it!—an', anyway, the childhre is rared: there's great encouragement in that thought. I do be often tellin' them that it's soon little use I'll be to them but sittin' in the chimney-corner with a stick in me hand to keep out the ducks an' hens that do be for ever messin' me clane kitchen flure."

"Oh, nonsense, woman!" roughly. "That

time's a long way off. But where are the youngsters anyway ? ”

Biddie met the question with a slightly embarrassed smile. “ Then maybe it was more foolishness of me, Barney Finnerty, but I left them at home on purpose. You see, they were but young toddling things whin himself left us ; I'd like to prepare his mind for the change in them by slow degrees. But whisht, man !—wasn't that the screech of the thrain ? ”

II

When Biddie, in her desire to spare Mike's feelings a possible shock, elected to go alone to the station, she had not bestowed a thought on the changes time might have wrought in him too. Yet here also it had unsparingly done its grim work. A worn man, past middle age, greeted her on the platform where she had parted, sixteen years ago, from the youthful husband of her dreams. Not that that mattered greatly to Biddie once his arms were about her, and his eyes, shining with delight, looked into hers. However hardly time had dealt with them both, the old love held him still, and the faithful woman's ambition soared to no higher point of satisfaction : her heart rose with an exultant bound at sight of the radiant joy in his face.

Mike was in his happiest mood this evening.

He had a new and pleasant sense of victory won, a glow of conscious triumph that overcame the last vestige of the remorse which had held him silent so many years. Now he could meet Biddie's eyes again without the old shame and dread. Not that he had been so bad after all, no worse anyhow than scores of his countrymen flung all unprepared into the hell of a big English manufacturing town. And, unlike some of them, even when fallen to its lowest depths, he had never lost thought of the wife and children waiting for him at home. Many a time the tiny forms of the children floated before his sight amidst the whirl of wheels at the factory, or the Babel of noisy voices at the public-house close by. Like the little ones early taken, they always wore for him the first soft grace of childhood, never growing older by a single year. He saw them running to meet him, heard the patter of their little wavering feet, and their voices calling, "Daddie, Daddie!"

It was to them he owed his ultimate salvation, and now in this unwonted reaction of spirits it seemed an easy matter to atone to Biddie for the past—nay, even to take up the thread of their lives at the point where it had been broken off sixteen years ago. But with a difference. For the cotton bag, which she had herself made for him to do duty as a purse, was full at last of his savings, full to overflow-

ing, and they were all for her, to keep want away from her door for ever.

He tried to tell her this in clumsy but convincing phrases, as he trudged by her side along the familiar homeward-winding road, filled with almost forgotten scents of far-off summers: the lingering sweetness of honeysuckle, and the dainty breath of the dog-roses tossing their starry clusters above the thick, bird-haunted hedges of hawthorn and privet and sloe. And Biddie listened with a beating heart and the softly-blushing cheeks of a happy maiden, never pausing to consider that Mike's tardy help could make but little change now in her prospering fortune. There was not even a touch of conscious pride in her attitude when they gained the summit of a hill overlooking the neat white-washed cabin, and Mike's astonished glance, travelling critically over the well-tilled fields on either side, noted the unmistakable tokens of a prosperity in which his hand had wrought no share.

"Aye, it's all there much as you left it," Biddie said simply. "Sure it'd be a poor welcome you'd get from an altered place. See! There's the corn in the same field behind the house: 'tis as thick and green as the day you left. And there's a couple of cows grazin' in the hollow beside the lake, and a litter of young pigs in the sty beyant. And the childhre——" she broke off suddenly. "You'll

hardly know the childhre at all, I'm thinkin', Mike," she resumed, looking anxiously up into his face.

"But indeed I will," retorted the man heartily. "For they were ever and always afore me day and night: the little yellow-haired chap with eyes like you, Biddie, and the two girshas—God bless them!—that thought there was nobody like 'Daddie' in the length and breadth of Ireland."

"Well, look at them! There they are," exclaimed Biddie in a tone of extreme pride, as they came to a pause before the yard gate. It lay open as usual. The yard beyond stretched dim and quiet in the grey gathering shadows. The fowls had for the most part gone to roost; here and there a belated straggler was zigzagging slowly towards its perch; a few brown and white ducks were bobbing and splashing in a dirty puddle near the byre, scattering feathers about like drifting snowflakes; a fat pig was grunting lazily on the dung-heap in one corner, and a big sheep-dog was lying in a watchful attitude before the house door, following through half-closed eyes every movement within the yard. But it was not upon such details as these that Mike's eager glance paused. It was held fascinated, spellbound, by the picture that greeted him from the doorway where, grouped together in an attitude of joyous expectancy, were two buxom girls

and a tall youth, fast shooting up into manhood.

At sight of them he stood stock-still, aghast. They had been about to rush forward, but, as he made no corresponding movement towards them, a sudden fit of shyness seized upon all three, and for a few moments there was a general and somewhat embarrassing pause.

Then Mike turned to Biddie. "You didn't tell me," he faltered; "and I thought to find no change. Maybe it's foolish, but I'd rather have the little ones back. But," with a sudden gleam of hope, "these *can't* be the childhre, Biddie!"

He looked up appealingly into her wan countenance, and for the first time noticed that all the rosy comeliness of youth was gone from it. Biddie shivered as she met his glance; a cloud had fallen upon and obscured her joy.

"It is them, sure enough," she made answer quietly. "Come, childhre, don't stand gapin' there. Is this the way to welcome home yer father?"

A quiver of entreaty in the mother's voice drove the young people shyly forward, and called back the glow of welcome to each chilled, hesitant face. But there was no answering motion of tenderness on Mike's part. Smitten by a shyness greater than their own, by a sudden sense of shock, almost of disaster, he stood motionless, surveying them with the

examining stare we give to strangers who have unexpectedly thrust themselves into our life.

"Spake to them, Mike, the crathures!" whispered Biddie, nudging him persuasively; and thus adjured he held out an awkward, unwilling hand.

"Welcome home, father," they said in chorus; but the words were uttered coldly and mechanically, like a lesson learned by rote: on them, too, the sense of disaster had fallen.

Although there was, no doubt, a comic element in Mike's unpreparedness for a situation which he ought to have foreseen as inevitable, few could refuse to pity him as he stood there, too dismayed for speech, with his cherished dream-picture obliterated at a stroke. His first feeling was one of hatred for the unoffending trio, such as he might have experienced towards interlopers filling the places of the children he had known and loved. He could not clothe his thoughts in actual form, but he felt vaguely conscious of seeing in them an embodiment of all he most desired to forget—the broken promises, the faltering resolution, the long, unavailing years that lay like a gulf between them. Looking at the children, grown-up and stranger-faced, and then at the lines traced on their mother's once blooming countenance, he realized in one lightning-like moment that his youth was dead and gone beyond recall. He suddenly felt old, and stricken, and grey, and

useless, as one who has missed the purpose of his life. "He'll come used to yez in time; the strangeness'll soon wear off," Biddie assured the children, with the optimism of sheer desperation; but Mike's morbid frame of mind showed no signs of diminishing as the days went by and the children renewed their timid advances towards affection and a better state of things. She could see he felt ill at ease, a stranger, as it were, in his own house. No reviving pulse of fatherhood ever quickened his soddened heart into tenderness. The little ones of his youth were dead and buried as far as he was concerned, and he had no love left for those aliens who looked at him with curious, questioning eyes, and shyly called him "Father." Nay, more, he resented Biddie's devotion to them as though it involved a personal loss to himself. When she praised them with the natural pride of a mother whose children have comforted her hour of need, his blood caught fire with jealousy. He no longer took pleasure in the thought of the cotton bag full of his savings that was to have made easy all the days of Biddie's life: had not the children forestalled him here? The growing strength of their young arms had been spent for her, and now it had placed her beyond need of his tardy help.

When, as so often happened of late, that troublesome pain and oppression of the chest

attacked Biddie, and they hung about her with solicitous care, he felt more than ever useless and forlorn. What could he do for her with his awkward, skillless hands? He had known her only in the vigour of her prime, these had tended her over and over again, and to them he must yield his rightful place.

So matters drifted for awhile, and each day that passed the cloud above the narrow family horizon thickened, and each day Biddie looked more harassed than on the previous one, felt more utterly sick at heart.

It was a relief to all when the turf-cutting season came and the young people were in the bog from morning until night. With them away it became incredibly easy to Mike to bridge across the years and return to the happy past of his youth. Even some flickering grace of the past would steal back to him then, making him very gentle to his wife and attentive to her wants, as in the old days.

But this happy mood was of short duration. As dusk approached and Biddie began to bustle about her usual preparations for the evening meal, the brightness faded quickly out of his countenance, leaving it sombre as the twilight landscape of dreary grey bogs and dim hedge-enfolded fields. And at the first rumble of wheels lurching slowly up the narrow rut-seamed lane his overcast features resumed their habitual expression of morose severity.

To the "childhre," coming back hungry and tired after a hard day's work in the bog, the gloomy aspect of their home presented a painful contrast with their pleasant memories of the past. Once, their mother's comely figure waiting for them on the doorstep was the first sight to greet them when the lumbering little donkey-cart, turf-laden to its crates, jolted heavily into the yard. And always before her cheery greeting the day's fatigue dropped from them like a spent garment; they had even forgotten all about it by the time they were seated at supper in the firelit kitchen, and, letting their spirits rise with a glad rebound, they made the smoky rafters ring with their shouts of noisy mirth.

"'Tis moidered entirely they had the whole house with their rampagein'," Biddie often declared with mock severity, when the sleepy fowls, perched warmly on the blackened beams overhead, opened their eyes with inquiring cackles, and the sheep-dog, lazily outstretched on the wide hearthstone, sprang up excitedly to join his barking to the general din.

Old Dandy might now lie undisturbed through the whole evening in the glow of the peat fire, and the fowls sleep peacefully on their sooty perch; there was never a sound of voices or burst of laughter to disturb their rest. Mike sat, silent and sulky, in the chimney-corner, smoking his clay pipe; the "childhre"

huddled together in the shadows beyond the circle of firelight — a forlorn, disconsolate group.

Nothing could be more terrible than the dumb misery of this interval between sundown and bedtime. After several abortive efforts at restoring the intimate gaiety of former fire-side sittings, Biddie was silent for the most part herself, moving about restlessly, as though motion of some sort were necessary to relieve the tension of her nerves. At first it cost her a struggle to maintain this unnatural reserve, but as her health declined, and it did so visibly, she grew more apathetic, quietly accepting this sorry ending of her best hopes, as she had accepted all the other hard, unconquerable facts of her life.

III

It was the harvest-time again. Mike and the three young people had been at work in the corn-field since the twelve o'clock dinner. It was close on five now. Biddie had just made their tea in a big black can, and was cutting slices of bread and butter to accompany it in the covered basket which she used to carry food to them when, as in busy seasons like the present, they took their meals out of doors. A step on the threshold made her turn round with a start ; the knife dropped suddenly from her hand, falling on the table with a sharp,

disturbing clatter. She had grown nervous of late days, greatly to her own secret discomfort and vexation; she who had so bravely and wisely fought life's stern realities often found herself trembling at an unexpected sound outside, or the wavering of a passing shadow across the yard.

This time, however, fear rested on a more secure foundation; something serious evidently had happened. Her son was standing in the doorway, confronting her with a strange expression in his round, boyish eyes. One frightened glance told her this, and also that he carried his right arm in a sling, improvised of an old red cotton kerchief; a strip of the same stuff was wound tightly about the fingers of the right hand.

Biddie's heart stood still. Her thoughts, always hovering around the one subject, leaped at once to the possibility of a quarrel between father and son.

"He has hit you?" she articulated painfully. "Yez have quarrelled, your father and you?"

The lad nodded without speaking, and began to undo the soaking bandage, from which blood was dripping on to his trousers, making dark stains on the earthen floor. Biddie strove to aid him with fingers that trembled, but she fell back with a shriek when the last fold was loosened and the bandage dropped at her feet.

For the hand which he held out towards her showed a deep gash running midway between the thumb and wrist, from which blood was streaming down into his sleeve, and the thumb itself was almost severed at the joint. Something between a groan and a curse fell from Biddie's white lips.

"The saints above! His own flesh and blood, and a young, slendher boy forbye! Och, the hard, onnatural heart of him!" she cried incoherently, wringing her hands like one distraught. But the lad was pale and weak from fright and loss of blood, and noticing this, she became calm in a moment, busying herself silently about dressing the wounded hand, and not suffering him to speak a single word until she had replaced it in the sling, and was holding a cup of tea to his dry, white lips.

"Now tell me everything as it happened, avic," she said; "and a poor story it is for your mother's ears, God knows."

"'Twas with a rapin' hook—just a sthroke all of a suddint. The eyes was blazin' in his head; he was mad like, but I knew it 'ud come to this."

The boy jerked out the words with an effort. There were tears in his choking voice which only shame prevented from falling.

"Mother, we must go away," he went on more steadily; "or there'll be murther done.

'Tis a madman he is, out an' out. Me an' the girshas are all of the wan mind now. Ye know there'll be a big crowd goin' from here to America afther harvest, an' lavin' won't be so hard whin there's plenty of company from the same place."

Biddie faced him with a wild look. "Is it to go ye're sayin'?" she almost screamed, stung out of her habitual self-command. "Is it to go ye'd do an' lave your poor ould mother sittin' at a lonesome hearth? Och, wirra, wirra! fine an' well I knew the bitther day 'ud come! Sure many a time this while back I felt the heavy load of partin' settlin' on me heart. Whisht, asthore! Let me spake, or the heart within me'll burst with grief. An' they'd go an' lave me! Me that rared them in sorrow an' lonesomeness! The childhre! Och, God of Glory! must I let the childhre go?"

She was pacing up and down distractedly, heedless of her son's rough endeavours at comfort. Her passion, however, soon spent itself. She fell silent awhile, listening mechanically as he repeated over and over again, "Sure ye'll come too, mother. It's together we'll all go, mother dear."

At last she went over to where he sat, and laid a shaking hand on his shoulder. "Listen to me, alannah! I can't lave himself. 'Twas for betther or for worse I tuk him, an' we must

stand or fall together. But yez are young, an' the world's afore yez ; ye've a right to sthrike out for yerselves. Go, then, with me seven blessin's, an' we'll lave what's to come in the hands of God."

When the young people's decision was made known to Mike, his countenance showed the glad relief of one disburdened of an intolerable weight. His sombre eyes lighted with a revival of their youthful fire ; all his old affection for Biddie reasserted itself with undiminished force. He even made rough attempts to cheer her, and was lavish of the little lover-like attentions which had so endeared him to her in the old days. But a lump would rise in her throat when she tried to respond to his changed mood, and soon her eyes began to acquire the hard, bright look associated with constantly suppressed tears. Sometimes, hearing him whistling gaily about the house, she would snatch up a pail, and, muttering a feeble excuse about wanting water, rush away into the stubble-field, where the corn-stooks stood close together, and she could weep her heart out in their shelter. She would come back half an hour later with listless steps and the pinched, worn face of an old, old woman.

Poor Biddie had not believed herself capable of such suffering. When Mike left her, the bitterness of the separation seemed like a foretaste of death. But she had hope to lean

her heart upon then, and there were the little ones for whose sake it behoved her to be strong. Now the children were leaving the home she had guarded for them, leaving it cold and desolate, leaving her heart, her whole life desolate—this was death itself.

Though at first he pretended to ignore them, the mute signs of grief on his wife's wasted features did not escape Mike's jealous penetration. As autumn approached he became irritable again, and his sullen countenance held at times a dangerous expression that made the children tremble for their mother's safety when the protection of their presence should be withdrawn. But when they spoke to her on the subject, and prayed her by every persuasive argument they could think of to abandon the morose, ill-tempered man she could, surely, no longer love, Biddie sorrowfully shook her head. Her lot must always be his, she said, and there could be no more parting of their lives. She spoke with such decision that the children never knew how near they sometimes were to victory, never dreamed of the struggle raging in their mother's soul. Biddie herself was often terrified at her own weakness; there were moments when she felt too guilty to bear the scrutiny of her husband's watchful eyes.

Luckily she saw very little of him at this time, for he was with the young people in

the fields every morning after sunrise, and they seldom returned till dark. They were making a great effort to get the bulk of the work done before the second week in September—the date fixed for the children's departure, and Biddie could do little to help now beyond carrying their meals out of doors. Left alone, she moved mechanically from one household task to another until the long round was told. Then, too restless to sit down with her sewing, as in former, more peaceful days, she wandered forlornly about the yard, or stood for long minutes at the gate, shading her eyes with one hand from the sunset, and looking with fixed, far-off gaze along the level, winding road leading to the tree-embosomed town in the distance beyond. It was the same road down which, sixteen years ago, Mike and she had walked together, with heavy hearts, sustained only by the consciousness of their youth and mutual love.

How well she remembered it all : the parting at the station, the last stifled utterances, the last sight of her husband's smooth, youthful face ! Soon there would be another walk, funereal in its sad suggestiveness, down that very road, another and worse parting at the station, last words, last looks, at thought of which her soul turned sick and faint with dread. How should she bear it ? How should she bear it ?

At intervals, while she stood there, the stillness would be broken by the strident scream of an engine or the hoarse snort of an outgoing train ; and each time Biddie clapped her hands over her ears to shut out the hateful sound. Yet she could not tear herself away from the spot. The white road grew grey and shadowy ; the little town faded completely into the soft enfolding mist. In the west a faint afterglow lingered still, and Biddie raised wistful eyes to the narrowing space of crimson and orange light.

“ ’Tis thereabouts lies America,” she said to herself many times, trying to realize that soon, very soon now, she would stand at this very spot, straining sorrowful eyes westward towards her children’s strange new home. There would, she thought, be a sense of nearness to them at this hour. It would almost seem as though they were just at the other side of that rim of purple-pink glory above Slieve Gullion Mountain, and sure Slieve Gullion was only the matter of a day’s journey from Rathcoole. Thus Biddie strove to dull her sickening heartache, but the effort was but partially successful, for she knew the pitiful little fiction of their closeness to her could not be long maintained. When night once more settled down upon the land, and the grey gloom stretched from horizon to horizon, a sense of the vast distance between them would

be borne in upon her mind with tenfold force.

Mike came upon her one evening standing in her listless, waiting attitude by the gate—a bowed and shrunken figure, with haggard eyes turned westward.

The wind had risen and was fluttering the shawl loosely knotted about her shoulders; some strands of grey hair had escaped from beneath her white cap and were blown in disorder about her colourless face. Mike had entered at the back of the yard by a path leading from the fields. He was in an unusually softened mood this evening, for some sunset spell had been cast on him too, sending his thoughts straying back to that past which seemed to him but as yesterday. Again the barren years were wiped out; he was once more the youthful lover-husband, and the image of his wife's fair face in all its rosy freshness was before his eyes at the very moment they encountered the frail and aged figure leaning wearily against the gate.

The contrast, more sharply defined perhaps than usual, struck him with a despairing sense of loss. For a moment he stood watching her in passive misery, then a rush of fury inundated his heart. It was not all his doing, this change in her, as the children appeared to think. Curse them! It was fretting night and day over their going that was wearing her life

out, and withering her, untimely, into a feeble old woman. The children had stolen her love from him. He was nothing to her now. He ought never to have come back. She had forgotten him, and there was no home for him here.

Beside himself with rage, he tore across the yard and out of the gate, thrusting Biddie on one side with a swinging blow of his heavy fist. He came home late that night, his bloodshot eyes and thickened utterance showing how and where the hours had been spent. Something like panic seized upon Biddie when she opened the door to him, and he reeled across the threshold, mumbling curses in a strange, unfamiliar voice. This was a new Mike—one whom, thank God, she had never known before this night. Fear and disgust were in her face when she looked at him, and, despite the unswerving loyalty of years, the thought would come that it had been better, far better, for all if this man had never come back to Rathcoole.

IV

It was the children's last night at home. The day had been one of excitement, as, by a merciful ordinance, last days usually are. There were trunks to be packed—brand-new ones, paper-covered in a wonderful design of pink and yellow roses chosen by Biddie herself—

visits to be paid to friends living at a distance, and countless minor things to be attended to which kept them all fully occupied until nightfall. Even then but little leisure was allowed them for the exchange of sad thoughts. Shortly after dark, in accordance with local etiquette—very stringent on such momentous occasions—the neighbours began to drop in by twos and threes, until the small kitchen space was filled from wall to wall. And thereupon had followed much dancing among the young people, and singing of songs, and elaborate drinking of healths—each guest making a generous effort to conceal the gloom of parting under a brave semblance of mirth.

But they were all gone now. The children, tired out, had retired to rest and were already fast asleep. Mike, too, was abed, lying just as he had fallen, in a drunken stupor, his dusty boots rumpling the neat checked coverlet, and staining the whiteness of the home-made linen sheets. Biddie was the only wakeful inmate of the cabin, and sleep still seemed leagues away from her hot, tear-burned eyes.

She sat for a long time huddled up in the big straw chair, staring vaguely into the shadows with the dazed expression of one outworn with mental suffering. Now and then the withered hands lying helplessly in her lap, clenched themselves suddenly, or went up to her heart with the involuntary motion that

had become habitual to them of late. The kitchen, while she sat thus, gradually fell into gloom, as the untended fire smouldered and dropped into ashes, until at last the darkness was complete. Then, on a sudden, lifting her head, Biddie realized what had befallen. The fire was out. There was not one single spark of living red left glimmering among the dead embers on the hearth. The superstitious woman rose in immediate dismay. Such a thing had never happened before. She had never omitted covering the fire with ashes, and so keeping it alight till morning. That she should have done so on this particular night appeared little short of a catastrophe. For the youngest child in Rathcoole knew that the ample hearthstone of the peasant has from time immemorial been the gathering-place of the "good people," and must always be kept clean and warm for their chilly elfin feet. Woe enters the careless dwelling wherein their needs are forgotten. Biddie began to tremble with a sense of nameless dread.

The close atmosphere of the cabin, reeking with the stale odour of bad tobacco and raw spirits, seemed suddenly to stifle her. She was glad to open the door and inhale a deep, fresh draught of untainted air, and look up in a dull sort of wonder at the infinite peace of the grey night sky, faintly lighted by a few pale, remote stars.

In the silence surrounding her the least sound was distinctly audible, and served but to emphasize the loneliness of the hour. She could hear the wheezy old "wag o' the wall" clock ticking out the seconds with noisy precision. Even the purring of the cat reached her ears and the fluttering of wings in the darkness as the fowls, roosting among the kitchen rafters, moved restlessly on their sooty perch. Above these sounds, yet not loud enough to dominate them, could be heard, rising and falling, the monotonous snoring of the drunken sleeper, lying still in a torpid heap on the tossed and dust-stained bed. A shudder of disgust, almost of hate, passed through the woman listening there on the doorstep. She clapped both hands to her ears and rushed out distractedly into the yard.

The old sheep-dog, hearing a precipitous step through the dead hush and recognizing it for his mistress's, got up from the fireside corner in quick alarm and followed her stiffly to where she stood resting her folded arms wearily on the top bar of the gate. Divining something amiss, he came fawning affectionately about her skirts, and she stooped at once to caress him, partly from habit, partly because she was grateful for the solace of his company in the lonely tumult of her soul.

When she raised herself again, Biddie drew a sharp breath of suffering. The brusque

movement had made her unpleasantly conscious of the dull aching of her bruised chest, where, under the thin cotton bodice, the skin, still smooth and soft as a maiden's, bore livid traces of Mike's last insensate outburst of jealous rage. Recalling this, she smiled to herself with a sort of fierce joy. To-night the woman's whole soul was up in arms against the sore siege of destiny; to-night she welcomed the pain she was enduring just as she would have welcomed anything and everything that would serve to loosen the clinging habit of years and thrust this madman out of her heart. For a long time she stood in the soft grey gloom of the night striving to steel herself against him, striving desperately, despairingly, as the drowning struggle for salvation, till the cold sweat lay in beads upon her forehead, and she shook with weakness from head to feet. At last the sudden striking of the clock, which sounded alarmingly loud in the silence, startled her to a sense of the lateness of the hour. She counted twelve slow strokes, and as the twelfth died away in asthmatic wheezings, she straightened herself with an old gesture of her youth and with something of the old brave resolution shining in her face.

"I choose my childhre," she said aloud, as if in answer to a question, adding with unconscious bitterness, "'Twill be fine and asy to slip away with them unbeknownst in the

mornin'. Sure it's little he'll be throublin' his head about them or me."

Upon this she moved across the yard with a firm step and re-entered the dark living-room of the cabin.

There was a new and exquisite feeling of relief in her heart that surprised her by its intensity. All these weeks past her soul had been tossing between conflicting claims. She had known the anguish of doubt, the piteous uncertainty of one standing at the crossing of divers ways, looking with despairing eyes from right to left, but seeing never a friendly sign-post to direct his course. And now, at the last moment, the path was made clear to her; the tension of many days was suddenly relaxed. She seemed to have entered out of stress and storm a tardy haven of calm and rest.

Mike was still fast asleep when, a few minutes later, she stood, candle in hand, at his bedside. By this time the cool night air from without had sweetened the foul atmosphere of the room, and the man was resting quietly in an attitude familiar to her, with his cheek leaning on his hand.

She drew a step nearer, turning full upon him the flickering light of the feeble tallow "dip." No thought of wavering was in her mind, but the woman's eyes softened strangely as they dwelt on her husband's unconscious

face. For sleep had smoothed away from it the disfiguring traces of passion and restored somewhat of the long-lost grace of youth. In the dim light the still handsome features seemed almost boyish in their softened outline, and their expression was one of absolute repose. Now he moved and smiled—the kindly, good-natured smile that for the moment gave Biddie back the husband of her happy youth. A thrill of emotion set all her being vibrating painfully. Old memories came crowding fast upon her. She was once more back in the past of her girlhood, with every incident of her love and marriage painted in vivid panorama before her sight: the elopement in the grey December morning, the hasty wedding in the old priest's parlour, the lagging return home, and her father's sad but forgiving face. And then the early years of her married life, when love lightened the hard day's work, and she still felt that poverty with Mike was a dearer possession than a queen's crown of gold.

A spasm caught her throat, a mist rose between her and the vision of the past. The happy-faced young wife, with her bright, brave outlook over the years, faded suddenly into the shadows, and there was left drooping in her place an aged and broken woman, with all the hopeless misery of the present settling heavily about her heart. Biddie's senses staggered beneath the shock of that swift

return to reality. Seized with a sickening faintness, she swayed unsteadily from side to side; the candle flared and guttered in her shaking hand. She hastily set the candlestick down on the floor, and, dropping upon the wooden chair at the bedside, hid her face despairingly in her hands. Did this weakness mean she was wavering? And should she have to begin the struggle all over again, just when she was hoping to taste of peace? Before that prospect her self-control broke down utterly. A cry of distress rose irrepressibly to her lips, and at the sound the sleeper turned uneasily and moaned. Fearing he was about to wake, Biddie started to her feet and bent anxiously over him, then turned away, wringing her hands passionately, the hot tears raining down her cheeks.

For again memory was stirring within her, torturing her tired brain with pictures of the past. This time she saw Mike stretched on that bed, his white face ghastly against the scarce whiter pillow, just as she had seen him for many days together that time, years ago, when he had the fever so badly, and she had obstinately disputed him with death in this selfsame little room. It was her care alone had saved him, the doctor said, and he was young then and better able to cope with disease. Now he was old, broken, like herself, in the storm of life. If sickness were to lay a heavy

hand on him now, who would there be to care for the lonely, unpopular man? Why, he might lie there dying—dead—with none save the rats for company, like Moll Dwyer, the witch, in her desolate cottage on the other side of Annahallow Bog. God in heaven! If this were to happen to Mike and she away there beyond the big ocean, could she ever know one moment's peace of mind?

With a gesture, tragic in its utter hopelessness, she flung out both arms before her, letting her glance wander pitifully about the room, as if seeking help from the familiar objects among which her life began. When it came back to the bed and the sleeping figure, with its softened, youthful aspect, she saw nothing but a vaporous, wavering outline through eyes half-drowned in tears.

Almost as though her emotion had communicated itself in some mysterious way to the sleeper, Mike's placid features suddenly contracted, he moved his head restlessly from side to side, disturbed evidently by evil dreaming, and finally his lips parted in a long-drawn dreary sigh. That sound, more suggestive of real wretchedness than almost any other expression of human suffering, pierced Biddie to the heart's core. In one swift, unaccountable moment the floodgates of her resolution broke down, and all the love of the past rushed in upon her soul. Disgust, rancour, wounded

feeling, were obliterated, forgotten. Mike was in trouble, Mike wanted her: that was her sole thought.

"Whisht, alannah! Whisht! Sure I'll not lave you," she whispered brokenly, stooping over him with the infinite tenderness of a mother hushing her sick babe. "Sleep aisy! Sure I'll stay wid you, avic machree; I'll stay wid you if 'twas to kill me twinty times over!" she continued in a sobbing undertone, scarcely conscious of what she was saying. And then the room seemed to rock and reel about her; she slid down in a heap on the earthen floor and hid her face in the disordered covering of the bed.

After this there was dead silence in the room. The seconds, slowly ticked out by the kitchen clock, lengthened into minutes, then into hours, but Biddie took no heed. Sleep had laid healing fingers on her throbbing pulses, sent her wandering back along the pleasant pathway of the past, heedless alike of the aching present and the dark and lonely future from which her waking thoughts had recoiled. In this happy retrospect sorrow and care had slipped their fetters from her freed spirit; she was young again, with the blooming grace of early motherhood in face and heart. She could hear the tiny children pattering with uncertain steps about the room; she could see their dimpled forms dancing between

her and the sunlight of the open door. It was springtime she knew by the singing of the birds. The wild jubilation of their many-toned harmonies filled hedgerow and coppice and meadow—the very air seemed to be beating out music with every fragrant breath.

The songs of paradise could surely be no sweeter, she was thinking, when, with the abrupt transition of dreaming fancy the hand of Time turned further backward, and she was a child herself, rolling in the long meadow grass in the sunshine, then chasing the water-hens—a wild, impracticable little figure—by the reedy brink of the lake yonder in the hollow. But the swampy ground was cold for her naked feet; she could feel the clammy chill of it creeping up, up through her shuddering limbs, laying an icy touch, as of dead hands, about her heart.

“Mike!” she moaned, startled into semi-consciousness, but the frightened whisper was too faint to reach the dull ears of the sleeper, lying torpid as a log, within reach of her helpless hand.

“Mike!” she repeated, vainly striving to rouse herself. This time the voice was but the echo of a murmur, a tired echo, too, as though it had travelled far. It ended in a choking sigh. A sudden scorching shaft of pain, sharp as a sword-thrust, deadly as lightning, struck her full in the breast. A moment she quivered

under the blow, convulsed with anguish unspeakable, then the brief torture passed. A smile, beautiful and innocent as that of a happy child, spread like a widening sunbeam across the pallid face from which every sordid trace of age and care had strangely vanished, and remained fixed thereon like a symbol of eternal youth.

Another hour dragged by, and the stillness seemed to grow and deepen—the chill unhallowed stillness in which the soul of night goes out. Then slowly and imperceptibly the hush began to waver and a shiver of expectancy ran through the sleeping world.

Here and there shadowy cattle-shapes began to move about through the dim mist-enfolded fields; somewhere in the distance an owl, flapping its way to shelter, clove the air with a shrill, uncanny screech; on a neighbouring farmhouse roost a cock crew lustily, and a faint, half-fearful twittering sounded suddenly beneath the cottage eaves. Then, little by little, the smooth, windless darkness was riven; pale lights glimmered in the torn spaces, and its scattered fragments hung like ghostly banners against the grey desolation of the dawn.

Now Mike began to be restless again, tossing to and fro, and sighing with the same forlorn cadence as before. But this time Biddie did not rise to comfort him; she lay back in rigid

indifference against the wooden side of the bed. Nor did she move when a mouse scampered suddenly across the floor brushing against her hand, nor when the dog, roused from uneasy slumbers, came scratching and whining piteously at the closed room door.

Meanwhile the candle, all night dimly lighting the sleeping chamber, began to splutter in its socket with feeble, expiring gasps. At last it went out altogether just as a soft pink glow suddenly flushed the small uncurtained window, and the solemn shadow on the woman's placid features was touched with a ray of morning light.

The Little Sister

IT was St. John's Eve. Honor Gleeson stood before the kitchen window, in which she had set the small square mirror. Her toilet was completed now. She wore her Sunday frock of blue cashmere, and there was a new ribbon in her hair. She wanted so much to look her best to-night, and for that reason was more dissatisfied than ever with the pale image in the glass. Yet the face looking back at her was pretty still in its delicate refinement, suggesting rather the city-dweller than the rude worker in the fields. It must have been more than pretty once, before unceasing toil and much exposure to sun and wind had changed its milky whiteness to this dull sallow hue.

Honor was but little over twenty-eight, and already her patient eyes were ringed with lines. To-day she had, for the first time, noticed unmistakable threads of silver in her rich auburn hair. And Honor had been proud of her hair. She looked at the grey streaks and sighed. Why was life so hard for some? God alone

knew. If she went on ageing at this rate she would soon be an old woman. And would Hugh M'Glone love her still when her hair was as white as the stepmother's, and all her beauty faded? There again, God alone knew. The girl's face grew very sad, and she turned away from the glass with another weary sigh.

For five years Hugh M'Glone had courted her persistently, in spite of the stepmother's unwavering opposition. For since her father's death Honor had been the breadwinner of the family, and the stepmother, always delicate and complaining, could ill afford to part with her, even to let her go to a home full of comfort and happy interests of her own. But how long further would Hugh wait? That was the question. Again Honor sighed, this time hopelessly, like one who has reached the end of joy.

If it had not been for Alley she never could have resisted her lover's pleading. But Alley was a legacy left by her own dear mother, confided to her keeping in tender, broken phrases, from cold lips moving only by a supreme effort of love. Alley was almost sixteen now, but her needs were great, and there was only Honor to supply them.

"Is that the way you're dawdling? And the stepmother may be back any minute, and then there'll be no getting away at all."

The sudden voice beside her made Honor start violently.

"Oh, it's you, Alley," she said, in a relieved tone, turning towards the bright young face of the speaker. "You near frightened me out of my wits. I thought it was the stepmother, and I was afeared she was going to begin the ould talk over again. She's powerful hard set on sending me to America."

Alley nodded her head sympathetically. Between herself and the stepmother there was little love lost. However, they got on fairly well together, thanks to a certain diplomatic turn of mind which was Alley's secret possession, unsuspected even of Honor.

"She thinks you'd earn a dale of money," replied Alley, in a tone of half-apology. "You're a wonderful fine worker; it's a fortune you'd be making inside of wan single year. And then, you know, we could pay the rent and get a pig or two. And you could marry Hugh M'Glone, if he'd still a mind for you. She has it all planned out in her head."

Honor looked at her sister a moment in sad silence. The girl was as the very apple of her eye. She had lavished on her more than an ordinary mother's tenderness, feeling her love to be its own full and sufficient reward. But sometimes Alley fell short of even Honor's simple requirements; sometimes self-interest

made her side with the stepmother, and then Honor's little world grew dark.

"Fortunes aren't made in a year, Alley," she remarked drily, after a pause. "Nor yet in two or three. But if I married Hugh at once he'd help us to pay the rent—he has a trifle saved."

"Maybe, and he'd want the farm for his pains. And there'd be nothing at all left for me."

Honor was silent. Much as she cared for Hugh, she was not blind to his faults. Generous enough in most things, he had all the peasant's greed for land. It might be even as Alley feared.

"Well, well, we'll not talk of it," she said impatiently. "Talk never yet made crooked straight. And so you want to come to the bonfire, Alley. Better stay at home, acushla. The stepmother thinks you're over young for dancing and such like."

"Over young! And me near as tall as yourself! And you the tallest girl in the town-land."

"Ay, you're tall enough. Young things shoot up quickly. 'Tis only like the other day you were sitting in the corner beyant, nursing a rag doll," said Honor sadly, as she spoke turning to throw a few sods on the fire and set the kettle down to boil against the stepmother's return. Experience told her Alley

was not to be trusted in these trivial domestic matters.

"Then you'll not take me with you?" Alley spoke in a tone of ominous calm. "I know why. Since you took up with Hugh M'Glone you've never a thought for me. It's two stepmothers I have now—not wan."

"Oh, whisht, whisht! Alley, acushla," cried tender-hearted Honor, smitten with a most unjustifiable sense of remorse. "'Tis well you know I'll love you best of all so long as there's wan beat left in my heart. There get your shawl. It'll be all over with you if the stepmother comes back."

Alley nodded meaningly. The smile had come back to her face. And a very lovely face it was—rich and dark in colouring as any pictured Madonna of the old Spanish Masters. Whatever others might have suffered, evidently she at least had never known privation. Her oval cheek had the egg-like roundness of contour, her dark eyes the shining brightness of one who had never felt a care. Beside the warm beauty of that smooth young face the elder sister looked doubly worn and old.

"Make haste," urged Honor apprehensively, glancing towards the door. Alley dragged her shawl from a peg, and wrapped herself in its folds. In another moment they had closed the door behind them and vanished into the dusk.

It was one of those perfect summer nights that live long in the memory. Behind them the afterglow was flung against the west, like a fiery red flag. But in front the sky, in which no star had yet risen, stretched away in cloudless greyness to the far line of hills. The air was intensely still. Not a pulse beat among the leaves. All nature seemed watching for the stars and the coming of the early-rising moon.

Their way led across an open tract of country, where, in former years, a great clearance had been made. Stretching green spaces, dotted with sheep and cattle, now replaced the little pent-up farms. Meadows waved where corn once grew. From the æsthetic standpoint, perhaps, the change was all for the better. But to those who knew and loved the country there was a silence as of death in the lonely landscape. All the old sense of friendly neighbourship, of homely comfort, was gone.

The sisters unconsciously quickened their pace. A light silver film floated before them, hovering just above the long meadow grass. The air was laden with the subtle breaths that fill the June dusk. A pungent odour rose like incense from the warm, damp earth ; the scent of woodbine and dog-roses floated down from the hedgerows, and now and then a whiff of honey-sweetness was wafted from the scattered clumps of blossom-covered gorse.

As they walked, twilight deepened about them. In the wide grey fields objects were becoming indistinct. Here and there huge cattle-shapes loomed grotesquely. The sheep made specks of ghostly whiteness, moving slowly through the gloom. The country was very silent. There was not a sound save the swish of hungry teeth cutting, like scythes, through the rank clover grass, uneasy birds twittering among the bushes, the unceasing chirp of the grasshoppers, and the buzzing of the belated bees.

"It's like heaven," murmured Honor, clasping Alley's hand more tightly.

"Nonsense," said the practical young sister. "Do you think heaven's a place where fools go streeing across wet fields by night for nothing betther nor the sight of an ugly boy with a caroty head, that you can see without a ha'porth of throuble in broad daylight any day in the year?"

"I want to have a long talk with Hugh," explained Honor mildly. Then they relapsed into silence.

Presently a star or two came out, and the white disc of the moon rose suddenly above the dark brow of Annacroft. In another moment they were ascending the sloping shoulder of the hill. Voices were distinguished now; a scarlet tongue shot out suddenly through the darkness just above their heads; then another

and another till the whole crest of the hill seemed a pyramid of leaping flame.

When they came out on the top of the hill, they found a laughing crowd collected about the newly-lighted fire. Young people were gathering in groups of two or three, preparing for the dance. Children were rushing backwards and forwards with armfuls of dry brushwood. A little boy of five was fighting his way desperately towards the front, dragging behind him an enormous furze bush. Hearty cheers greeted his triumphant offering. Then a man good-naturedly swung him up on his shoulder out of the way of the dancers, who were making a ring round the fire.

"I see Hugh," whispered Ally; "he's going to dance. And there's the fiddler. Come on, afore the fun begins in earnest."

"No," said Honor, shrinking back. "We'll wait till he comes to us, and that'll be as soon as he knows we're here."

"'Tis too fond of waiting you are, Honor," said Alley, nodding her head sapiently.

However, Honor was right this time. As they came within the lighted circle, Hugh impatiently detached himself from the others and hastened forward to meet them. Seen by the ruddy light of the fire, he looked a handsome fellow enough, despite the disparaging fact of his carroty hair, to which Alley had recently made unkind allusion. Even

she felt inclined to withdraw her unconsidered remarks now. Honor might have gone further and chosen worse, she decided, watching him furtively out of the corner of her keen, observant eye.

"Well, Honor, is it to be 'Yes' to-night?" Hugh asked, slipping his arm tenderly about her thin waist. They had drawn a little further apart. Honor's hand still held Alley's tightly. For what was Alley but a child still? There was no need to bridle their tongues before her.

"'Tis the word I'd like to be saying," confessed Honor mournfully, "but the stepmother is set on my going to America. She gives me no pace from morning till night."

"And for what should you go to America at all, at all?" asked Hugh indignantly. "I thought ye couldn't be spared at home. Ye've said so often enough. Where's the use of making a fresh excuse? Hasn't the old one done these five years?"

Hugh spoke in a tone of bitter sarcasm that made Honor wince. She shrank closer to Alley's side.

"'Tis poorer than ever we are," she began, after a pause. "We owe three half-years' rent, and Mr. Eccles says he won't wait beyond November next. The stepmother thinks I'd have the money earned out there in less than

no time, and Alley is strong enough now to do the work at home."

"Well, well, do as ye plaze. But I've waited a long time, Honor. Not a boy of them all would have the same patience."

Honor was silent. She knew Hugh was right. Her hand mechanically squeezed Alley's, mutely asking for encouragement in the little sister's love. But Alley's hand remained limp and unresponsive. Her eyes were fixed on Hugh's eager face. It seemed to her that to-night she was really seeing him for the first time in her life. And something woke and stirred within her responsive to the passion in his voice. Her eyes began to shine with a new, strange light.

"'Tis long I have waited," Hugh repeated, having nothing better to say. He was a man of few words, but he had a very genuine admiration for Honor, amply expressed in the patience of his wooing. But now she was trying his patience too far. Even little Alley would admit this, he thought, turning for support to the silent younger sister. Alley's shining eyes still rested upon him, and she did not withdraw their soft, fixed gaze. Hugh looked straight into them, then he started violently, and the blood swept over his face. For the moment he was almost startled by her beauty. He, too, seemed to be seeing her for the first time.

"The little sisther is shooting up to you fast," he said, with awkward suddenness, embarrassed by his discovery, but unable to turn away his eyes. Honor recoiled. The inconsequence of the remark struck her with a vague sense of disappointment.

"Alley is tall for her age," she answered coldly. All three felt the change of tone, and there followed a moment of silence. Hugh saw he had somehow contrived to offend Honor, and he strove not to look at Alley. Meanwhile the merry-makers round the bonfire were growing every moment more boisterous. The strains of the fiddle were almost drowned in the uproar of voices and the rhythmic beating of the dancers' feet against the trampled sward.

"It's too noisy here," said Honor, glad of something to say. "One can't hear one's own voice."

As she spoke the group directly in front of the fire parted suddenly, leaving a gaping crimson space.

"Come away, then, behind yon bush," said Hugh hastily, wrenching his gaze from Alley's and turning to Honor with an expression of relief. She met his deprecating glance and smiled. As she stood facing him, with her head slightly tilted backwards, the searching firelight lit up her sweet, worn features, revealing all the weary lines about the eyes and

mouth. Looking at her thus illumined, Hugh suddenly realised what he had so long been blind to—that time had stolen upon them unawares, and Honor's youth was gone.

They moved towards the big thorn bush in silence. It was dark within its shelter. But despite the darkness Hugh thought he could feel Alley's eyes still fixed upon him with their soft, shining gaze. He turned suddenly to Honor and caught her by both hands.

"Don't go to America! Don't lave me, Honor!" he cried in a tone of startling vehemence. "'Tis unlucky for promised people to part. Many's the thing may happen. Who but God can tell? Say ye'll stay at home, and in God's name let us be married at once."

He pressed the girl's hands tightly. There was a note of beseeching in his voice. For a moment she was too surprised to answer, then she said quietly:

"I'll give the stepmother the few pounds my own mother left me. It's the only thing I can do for Alley. Then I'll be free to follow your bidding."

Half an hour later they separated. Honor went home with a light heart and a new sense of freedom. When they reached home the stepmother rose up from her stool beside the fire and met them in the doorway.

"So there you are! And you're not wan

bit ashamed of yourselves, stepping in to me at this black hour of the night. A nice pair of hussies ! A fine legacy for a lone woman ! You can enjoy yourselves and ruin hanging over us. But, sure, Honor's head is full of courting and nonsense : much she cares what becomes of Alley or me ! ”

It was the stepmother's shrill voice greeting them with the usual torrent of complaints. Honor was too much used to complaints to give them much heed at any time, least of all to-night. Without answering she quietly laid aside her shawl, folded up the ribbon that had bound her hair, and placed it in its box. Then she went over to the hearth, where her stepmother had re-seated herself on the “creepy” stool—a dimly outlined figure in the light of the smouldering fire.

“ I'm not going to America, if that's what you're driving at,” she announced, in a tone of calm decision. “ There's money enough in the bank to pay the rent and lave a trifle over for yourself. I'll give it to you all.”

While Honor was speaking the stepmother's withered face had flushed a dull red. She looked up now, trembling slightly, but endeavouring to appear at ease.

“ What money are you talking about ? ” she asked, in her shrill, high-pitched voice. “ Don't you know well there's not a pound left in the bank ? Whisht ! ”—as Honor uttered a cry—

"You needn't blame it on me. It was for Alley I spent it, every penny, the time she had the sickness. Sure you needn't be frowning at me. Wasn't it God's will?"

Honor looked piteously at her stepmother, for the moment too stunned to speak. Why had this cruel wrong been done? If she had been told of their straits she could have procured good food and comforts for Alley in plenty without touching a shilling of that precious little store. For she was known to be a good worker. There was not one of the neighbours who would not have been glad of her services any day in the year. She could easily have earned enough to tide them over the bad time of Alley's illness. If only she had known!

Well, the stepmother would be punished now. The agent was a hard man, and he would see at once there was no use in giving them further time. You can't get money out of four cabin walls. Honor smiled almost triumphantly. In that first burst of anger even Alley was forgotten. Again she looked at the stepmother. This time there was an angry flame in the patient eyes.

"You've robbed me, then; you're no better than a common thief," she said, in a husky whisper. "'Twas all I had: my poor mother's savings. You could do this on me—and I always stood between you and want!"

Her voice broke and tears rushed into her eyes. Unable to control her emotions, she turned away from the stepmother, and moved towards the ladder-stair leading to the room above. At the foot of the staircase she paused, struggling a moment for speech, then said in a tone of quiet decision :

“ Whatever happens, I’m not going to America. Mind, them are my last words ! ”

Then she turned away again and began slowly mounting the stairs. The stepmother looked at Alley, dismayed.

“ ’Tis in earnest she is,” gasped the old woman. “ And there’s nothing but ruin afore us. Run afther her, Alley. Spake to her ! Sure she can refuse you nothing.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Alley bounded after Honor. The stepmother chuckled.

“ Honor, what’s the stepmother’s badness to me ? Why should I suffer for her ? If we lose the farm, we’ll be thrown out on the wide world. You’ll have Hugh, but what’s to become of me at all, at all ? A young crathur without a friend ! And you could so aisy make the money, and we’d all be happy again ! ”

Alley’s voice rose wild and beseeching. She caught Honor’s skirts and held them firmly in her thin, childish hands. There was no mistaking the sincerity of the appeal. The

elder sister felt it, and for the first time her strong heart failed. She turned round slowly, looking down with mournful tenderness at the lovely pleading face. There was something in the rigid attitude that awed even Alley. She released the skirt she was clutching, and fell back against the wall. For a moment nobody spoke. The only sound came from the clock beneath them in the kitchen, ticking loudly in the stillness, and from the step-mother, who was rocking herself to and fro, and moaning softly, like one keening for the dead. At last Honor broke the silence.

"When you tell me to go, Alley, it's full time for me to be laving," she said, and there was already the sadness of farewell in her voice.

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"I wish you could write to me, Hugh," said Honor wistfully. "'Twould be like talking across the sea."

"Ye know I haven't the schooling, Honor," answered Hugh, in a tone of apology. "But I'll often be thinking of ye, and I'll sometimes send ye a newspaper, and shamrocks, too, for Patrick's Day."

Hugh had forced a tone of unusual heartiness into his voice. That last thought was a perfect stroke of genius. But Honor still looked sad. They were standing on the platform of

a quiet wayside station, with the July sunshine laughing gaily into Honor's tearful face. Alley and the stepmother were there too, and a group of friends, gathered, as was the custom, to cheer the emigrant's heart with laugh and jest till the last good-byes were said.

"It's a letter I'd like best," said poor Honor mournfully, taking her seat in the carriage.

"Alley will be often writing," shouted Hugh encouragingly, as the train moved out of the station. That was her last memory of them: Alley nodding her dark head vigorously, Hugh waving his big red handkerchief, and the stepmother tossing her skinny arms to and fro, and raising her banshee wail.

Honor was fortunate enough to find a situation on the very day of her landing in America. Her refined looks and manner commended her to the post of attendant on a wealthy invalid lady, at a salary almost terrifying to one of her simple ways of thought. Surely one year's earnings would suffice to pay off all the debts on the farm, she said to herself, with a thrill of happy pride.

Every quarter a substantial sum made its way across the ocean, and every quarter came an acknowledgment in Alley's cramped childish hand. It was good of Honor to think

of them, she said, but the debts were still far from being paid. The stepmother was ill, and matters were going from bad to worse on the farm. Only one thing kept the agent quiet, the knowledge that they had an earner beyond the sea who would never let the fire out on their hearth.

Though disappointed at the necessity for her continued exile, Honor bore up bravely at first, bore up even when Alley's letters grew fewer, and there was never a sign to tell of Hugh's existence at all. Only the watchful mistress saw how much she suffered, noticed the lines deepen visibly on the gentle, careworn face.

After two years the letters from Alley ceased abruptly. Honor's last remittance remained unacknowledged. Then she grew frightened. She would have liked to start for home at once, but the invalid mistress counselled patience. Perhaps she guessed what had happened. Anyhow, the girl, always docile, submitted to her will.

"Stay with me, Honor," she said beseechingly. "I was so lonely till you came. An old maid has few friends; people serve her for interest only, but you work for love."

"And Hugh?" murmured Honor, falteringly.

"He is young. If he is worth his salt he will wait. Stay with me; it won't be for much longer, Honor."

And because she had learned to love her mistress, Honor could refuse her nothing. Again she promised to wait, again making her own happiness subservient to another's pressing need.

Three years later she was a free woman. The invalid, after much suffering, was dead. Honor was rich now. Her mistress had left her a substantial legacy. At home she would be regarded as a great heiress. The thought quickened her pulses. She began to think in a timid, trembling way of her long-deferred happiness.

But the five years of service in a sick room had changed Honor sadly. She no longer dared to look at the worn face in the glass. Still, if Hugh had ever really cared for her, he would not mind the change. So she took comfort. And after a while a little well of hope bubbled up in her heart. In a sudden reaction of spirits she began to look forward to the journey home with the impatient eagerness of youth. Once actually on her way home, it seemed easy enough to forgive the years of silence—all the shortcomings of the past. She sometimes almost wished she had written home to warn them of her coming. But of what use was regret? There was either the old place still kept for her, or they had ceased to miss her, ceased to want her—time alone would tell.

It was night when she arrived at the term of her journey, and darkness had already fallen. No other passengers alighted at this remote wayside station. On the ill-lit platform a solitary porter was standing, lantern in hand, staring vacantly at the long line of carriages. The wind blew the smoky flame of the oil-wick against the glass sides of the lantern; behind him weird shadows danced grotesquely on the low grey wall. An indefinable feeling of sadness stole upon Honor's mind, a sense of utter forlornness such as she had never yet known. She stood, unrecognised and undecided—a pathetic figure enough on the lonely platform—till the engine screeched through the silence, and, its great flanks trembling with eagerness, steamed, snorting, out of the station. Her eyes wistfully followed the friendly trail of light along the curving line of rails, beneath the stone bridge near the village, then round a further curve, where it vanished abruptly into the black mouth of the night.

Then she turned to the waiting porter. Her luggage lay beside her in a forlorn heap on the platform. The man eyed her curiously. His face was that of a stranger.

“If ye'd be wantin' a lift,” he said, “there's a car waitin' outside.”

Honor nodded. She was too depressed for speech. The man shouldered her boxes, and

she followed him out on the gravelled space where a single car waited. There a sudden thought struck her.

"Will you have the boxes kept for me till they're called for?" she said, putting some coppers into his hand. The porter nodded, then hailed the car in a gruff voice, as if her generosity had offended him.

"I wish it was old Tom, and not this stranger," she said to herself, looking round with a shiver of loneliness at the dim, silent station.

"Now where may you be for?" asked the car-driver, coming forward, and peering curiously at the new-arrival. The porter officiously held up the lantern before her shrinking face. Something genial and hearty in the man's tone struck Honor as familiar. Surely she knew that voice. The next moment she recognised him. Of course, it was her old schoolfellow Arty Chute, looking little altered by the years. Now, indeed, she felt it was home at last. Her tired face lit up with pleasure. She half extended her hand. But Arty's eyes remained cold and unrecognising. To him she was but a passing stranger, come from he knew not where.

Again a shiver passed through Honor. Was she then so changed from the friend of Arty's youth?

"I want to go to Widow Gleeson's,"

she said at last, striving to command her voice.

"The Widdy Gleeson ! For sure ye must be an out an' out stranger, or ye'd know she's dead these three years an' more."

Honor approached the car, and leaned for a moment in silence against the cushioned seat.

"But her daughter Alley ? She's in the old place still ?" she managed to articulate, after the brief pause.

"Alley ? To be sure she is, an' as handsome a crathur as ye could wish to see in a day's travel," exclaimed the man, with sudden cheerfulness of tone and manner. Perhaps he guessed at the emotion trembling in the stranger's timid voice. "Jump up on the car, an' I'll take ye to her in less than a pair of minutes."

Honor obeyed in silence. The man took his seat on the opposite side of the car, whipped up his jaded horse to a shambling trot, and they jolted away into the darkness. After a while the slow trot slackened into a walk. This was the signal for the car-driver to open a conversation with his silent fare.

"Yon's the village—where ye see the lights," he began. "'Tisn't much of a place to them that comes from furrin parts. Now I'll be bound ye come from America. Ye have the strange American spache."

"Have I ?" answered Honor faintly. This

discovery brought with it a fresh sense of shock.

"When ye were out there beyant, did ye ever chance to meet with one Honor Gleeson?" continued her questioner. "A fine girl she was. None of the big showy sort, but the best worker in the country. I was mighty set on her once, but that's an ould story. I'm a married man now, with five childer, an' all my thoughts are taken up with how to put bread enough into their hungry mouths. All the same, I'd like to know how she was doin', just for the sake of ould times when we were young together."

The girl hesitated, scarcely knowing what to answer.

"Ye're never Honor Gleeson yerself?" asked the driver, noticing her embarrassment. There was a note of suppressed eagerness in his voice, and he turned round suddenly on his seat, as she leaned towards him in the darkness.

"No, no," cried Honor hastily. "I'm not Honor Gleeson; I'm only a far-out friend."

The denial came to her lips spontaneously. She could not have analysed its motive.

"Ah, well, she was a fine girl," said the man, settling back on his seat, and resuming his careless pose. He said no more for a while, but Honor could hear him muttering to himself over and over again: "A fine girl!"

Poor Honor Gleeson! The best girl of them all."

A shudder went through Honor. The words, with their lingering intonation of regret, sounded like a dead girl's epitaph.

They drove on for the next few minutes in silence. The lights of the village were behind them now; before them stretched, between dark hedges, the stony, ill-kept road. How well she remembered it! Every rut into which they momentarily jolted was familiar as a childhood's friend. But she had no heart for the old landmarks. She shut her eyes in utter weariness of soul and body. Only one longing possessed her now: to hold Alley in her arms and take refuge from her altered world in the little sister's love. Would Alley fail her this time? She had often failed her before.

"There's the house now—Widdy Gleeson's, I mane. God rest her conthrairy soul!" said the man, pointing with his whip towards where a light twinkled through the darkness a few yards further ahead.

"Let me down here," said Honor hastily, as she spoke jumping off the car. The man got down more leisurely, and came to her side. Afterwards he remembered how his heart suddenly warmed to this stranger, whose voice brought back confused memories of his youth.

"If ye're from America," he began half-sheepishly, "maybe ye'd have met with Honor Gleeson? I was terrible hard set on her once, an' for all I'm a married man, I'd like to know how she was doin'."

"I know her very well," answered Honor. She was fingering with the clasp of her purse, and hesitated a moment before continuing. Then she went on in a firmer tone: "When I saw Honor last she told me she was promised to a young man in her own country, and was busy saving up money against their marriage-day. Maybe you'd know all about it?"

"Ay, do I," said the car-driver grimly. "For I could make no headway with her compared with Hugh M'Glone. She thought there was no wan like him. An' a dacent boy he was for sure. But she kept him too long waitin'; his patience was all run out. An' the young sisther had the purtiest face: a false little snake! She drew on Hugh with her coaxin' ways. A saint couldn't have stood them. They're married now these three years, an' they say Hugh is well contint. She was always a deep wan—not like poor Honor. But for why shouldn't Hugh be contint, seein' he has two farms now, him that was always so powerful hard set on the land?"

The man paused, expecting a reply, but Honor was still fumbling with her purse. Her face was white and fixed like that of a dead

woman. It was well Arty could not see it through the thick screen of darkness. At last, however, she produced the money, and returned his civil good-night. But she did not stir till he had turned round the car, and was jolting back to the village. Then she walked up the road to the house.

The small, four-paned kitchen window was uncurtained, and the light from within streamed out into the yard. Honor pushed the gate open, then stood for a minute leaning against one of the iron piers.

So this was her home-coming! No dream but solid truth! There before her was the house she had last seen smiling at her, with the July sunshine flooding all the moss-grown thatch and the low white-washed walls. Now it was wrapped in darkness, turning upon its cast-off child a cold, repellent face. It too had forgotten her. There was no place kept for her in the old home; nobody wanted her any more.

After a moment she approached the window, and dropping on her knees beneath it, crouched close against the wall. There was a sound of voices within: a man's deep tones followed by the thinner notes of a woman. Hugh and Alley, she said to herself, with a sudden rush of bitterness. They were in there together, sitting, as Hugh and she had often sat, planning out their future by the red light of the fire.

The deadly bitterness in her heart deepened. She felt it would have killed her to raise her head and look in upon their happiness. Better to go away at once, she thought drearily, else her heart would surely break. She half rose from her knees, then sank back, arrested by the opening notes of a soft crooning song. Gently it rose and fell with a drowsy cadence, like the singing of summer waves ; then there was a low rocking sound, and then a sharp wail.

Honor started to her feet. Had those within looked up they must have seen the white face pressed against the panes. Her haggard eyes dwelt hungrily on the homely fireside picture, on the rows of shining tins she had often brightened, on the familiar face of the clock staring at her from the brown, smoke-stained wall. There was even the same grey cat curled up on the cushioned chair in the chimney-corner, beside it the stepmother's "creepy" stool. Everything was as it had been. Honor felt her youth come back ; she longed to pull the latch and enter with the old assured step. But no ! The door was forever barred against her. The new owners were in possession, and she stood outside, homeless, surrounded by the night.

Her eyes travelled to the hearth, and the two figures bending over the cradle of their child. Now the shrill wail broke out again ; the stooping figures bent lower over the cradle. This

time the effect of the child's cry on Honor was electrical. A sob shuddered into her throat, and she trembled from head to foot. A moment she hesitated; the wail rose shriller and higher. Then a sudden panic seized her. She turned away from the lighted window and fled into the dark.

The road was a dull grey streak beneath the starless sky. Beyond, the bog stretched black and impenetrable, bounded only by the thick wall of night. The solitary light of the station twinkled in the distance. That way escape beckoned, but Honor took no heed. Above the bog lights flickered too, strange lights that shone out brightly for a moment, then vanished into gloom. They seemed to call Honor, and she ran forward eagerly, as if to meet a friend. Perhaps she forgot the treacherous, slimy spaces, the deep, sullen pools. More likely she never thought at all, driven forward solely by a blind instinct of flight.

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Honor Gleeson had come back. The news went round like wildfire. All Arralee knew it before a single day was over. Were there not her boxes at the station, with her name in big white letters on the lids? And had not Arty Chute driven her within a stone's throw of her home? It was of no use for Alley and Hugh

to look incredulous: let them go to the station and see the boxes for themselves. They did so, and returned with white faces to the farm.

After that the talk grew louder. Of a certainty Honor had come back. Then why had she stolen away again, like a thief, in sight of her old home? The loosened tongues grew bitter now. Hugh and Alley were to blame. Did not Arty feel her trembling like a leaf beside him in the darkness when she asked for news of Hugh M'Glone? Arty felt ready to curse his tongue for its foolishness. Still, the news had to be told. So people talked and talked, and the feeling against Hugh and Alley rose higher and higher with every word that was said.

"Let them talk," said Alley indifferently. "Wasn't she free to come and go as she liked? And may be she's not far off. When her temper cools she'll come back."

But months passed, and still Honor did not return. Then practical Alley grew uneasy about the luggage still lying unclaimed at the station.

"It's a sin to have good clothes going to waste," she said. "We must have the boxes home."

But Hugh was for leaving them untouched till Honor came to claim them. Alley humoured his scruples for a while, then one

day, when he was out, went to fetch the boxes herself. She opened them that evening before Hugh's return. He found her still on her knees before them, for there was much to unpack, much to admire. Honor's two boxes were crammed to bursting with presents for the little Alley of her dreams !

The Doctor's Joke

THE doctor's second wife was a person of some consequence in the town of Ballyallen. She was the eldest daughter of The O'Brien of Clonmore Castle, and the O'Briens of Clonmore, as everybody knows, can trace their descent in a direct line to one of the princely houses of Ireland.

Her marriage to Dr. Terence Smith—a middle-aged widower with five troublesome children—might have made a nine days' wonder in the neighbourhood if people had not recollected in time that, after all, Clonmore Castle was said to be tumbling about the head of its owner for lack of means to repair it, and, moreover, Miss O'Brien had reached the age when sensible girls just take what they can get in the matrimonial market, leaving choosing and refusing to fastidious maidens still dallying in their teens. That she had not done so badly for herself was universally admitted; even from the O'Briens' point of view the match could by no means be regarded as a *mésalliance*. Dr. Smith was both clever and popular; he

was in enjoyment of a fair income; his good nature was proverbial, his social position sufficiently assured to satisfy the needful requirements of a decayed family that, having little else left, had made a fetish of its pride.

Five years had passed since the Doctor's second matrimonial venture, and on the whole he was inclined to pronounce it a success. Mrs. Smith mothered his children with conscientious devotion, never, however, forgetting that they were only plain, undiluted Smiths and she was a "real O'Brien of Clonmore."

Fortunately for the peace of the household, the Doctor possessed a keen sense of humour. Far from being irritated by his wife's little weaknesses, they provided him with a perennial fund of enjoyment.

"She is better than physic any day," he used to declare after one of his frequent outbursts of mirth. But he was far too good-natured ever to let her suspect this, keeping his laugh until he found himself alone, or there was nobody by but his ward, Emily O'Brien. Emily was the only child of Mrs. Smith's favourite brother, and she had come to live under the Doctor's roof on the death of her father three years ago. She was an O'Brien on both sides of the family, her parents having been first cousins, and in her aunt's opinion she had all the beauty and wit and daring of

the traditional great ladies of her race. That such qualities could be combined in a single individual without some definite purpose Mrs. Smith argued to be inconceivable, and for once the Doctor, with whom the girl was a prime favourite, thoroughly acquiesced in his wife's opinion. He agreed too that beauty, however pre-eminent, buried away in a remote country village, runs little chance of co-operating in the obvious designs of Fate.

"She must have a season in Dublin," Mrs. Smith declared after lengthy deliberation, and again the Doctor promptly assented, having no better scheme of his own to propose.

A few months later, therefore, Emily went to town, chaperoned by the Dowager Lady Killmore, made her bow at the Viceregal Court, a ceremony which duly qualified her to take her share—no inconsiderable one as it proved—in all the season's gaiety.

Dublin, the Dublin she frequented, was lively enough that spring to satisfy the most exacting débutante, though elsewhere the country mourned. It was the year of the abortive Fenian rising, and while Society made merry in the orthodox way, the paid informer did a flourishing trade: brave men succeeded one another in the felons' dock, the jails filled, and the heel of an angry Government was ground into the land.

Whatever Emily O'Brien may have privately

thought and felt on the subject of the stirring events taking place about her, she showed no outward sign of interest or concern. Not even when she heard her old friend and playfellow, Wilfrid MacNevin, denounced in terms of utmost wrath and bitterness as not only a Fenian dangerous to the peace of the country, but also an arch-traitor to his own class and kin. It may be that the news was no surprise to her; she may have been deeper in the confidence of this rash young aristocrat than the friends of either supposed. However all that might be, so wisely did she play her cards during this trying crisis that her show of callous indifference went unquestioned. Had her loyalty ever been impugned, her demeanour now would have established it beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Intelligence that a warrant for MacNevin's arrest had been issued reached her on the night of a brilliant Castle ball, and just for a single moment her proud spirit failed. For a moment she held her bloodless face turned away from the multi-coloured spectacle, and the smile on her lips grew fixed as if carved in stone. Then her cheeks flamed suddenly crimson, and her eyes gleamed like the sharp blade of a sword.

"There is many a cave on the coast of Galway," she thought triumphantly, letting herself be swept back into the giddy whirl of

dancers, where her feet made merry till the dawn.

Young MacNevin had not yet been captured when, at the close of the season, having refused more than one excellent offer of marriage, Emily returned to Ballyallen, still unfettered in hand or heart, greatly to her uncle's amazement and her aunt's unqualified disgust.

The latter might have felt the disappointment more keenly had not a fresh field of hope revealed itself to her match-making eyes. During her niece's absence in Dublin a new regiment had come to the garrison town adjoining Ballyallen—a crack English regiment with plenty of money to spend and the halo of a prospective title to gild the officers' mess.

Captain Vaughan, from whom the halo emanated, was the eldest son of the Earl of Mitford, and heir, therefore, to the title and family estates. He was handsome, foolish, distinguished, and sentimental like the bulk of his countryfolk—altogether just the sort of man, Mrs. Smith decided, to fall an easy victim to the charm of an Emily O'Brien. And already the ground had unconsciously been prepared for an easy conquest of his soft Saxon heart. He had heard her beauty praised by men who were known connoisseurs, listened to story after story of her gracious

Irish ways, until his head was turned before ever he set eyes on the syren, and from striving to picture the face so often described in his hearing, he fell to weaving romantic follies about the dry facts of her simple life. It was said he even undertook a secret journey to view the ancestral home of her family, and returned enchanted but a physical wreck after three days of 'The O'Briens' too generous hospitality. It needed a stronger head than his to stand such frequent libations of the good old wine still lingering in the musty cellars, to say nothing at all of the famous whisky-punch that made a steaming paradise of the big dining-room at Clonmore.

When the impressionable Englishman and the fascinating Irish girl did at length meet, the inevitable thing happened, as everybody had foreseen it would. Captain Vaughan became from the first moment her most enslaved admirer. Indeed his naïvely-expressed passion was soon the talk of the country, and Emily began to notice a new shade of respect in the homage paid her by neighbouring young squires who were free enough in their advances before.

"You will be the honourable Mrs. Vaughan in six months' time," her aunt delightedly predicted, but the girl's only answer was an inscrutable little smile. In her heart she knew

that not this year, nor next year, nor any other year would see the prophecy fulfilled. But she listened quietly to her aunt's constant rhapsodies, nothing betraying her feelings but that pale shadow of a smile, which only intensified the sadness of her mouth. And thus nobody was the wiser if amidst all the talk of titled suitors and rich estates the girl's thoughts quitted this pleasant southern county and strayed longingly back to her wild Galway home, perched high on the ledge of a cliff, within earshot of the seagulls' constant screaming and the hoarse wash of the surf against the rocky beach.

She had spent a pleasant childhood in that grey granite-built old house, though her invalid mother was but poor company for a growing girl, and her father was always out of doors enjoying the season's sport—now gun on shoulder, tramping through bog and turnip field; now coursing a favourite greyhound; and now skeltering after the heels of the hounds, taking every stone fence that came in his way with the thoughtless ease of the west-country rider, and seldom coming home without the brush as a trophy to be offered to his little daughter. Later on, when she was old enough, she was often at his side in these wild careerings through barren wind-swept stretches of flat, stone-ridged country, with the salt breath of the sea blowing on her cheeks, and

the clamour of the tide sounding in her ears like the beating of many drums.

Sometimes Wilfrid MacNevin, the son of their nearest neighbour, bore them company on his stout Galway nag. He, too, was a daring rider, choosing the straight line, undeterred by obstacles great or small, and never thinking of danger till the possibility of it was passed. But he invariably turned aside, she remembered, from the death of the poor hunted creature about whom the hounds gathered in a greedy, tumbling heap. It was a sight fit only for cowards, he said—this cruel triumph of numbers over one little helpless beast.

A time came when his feeling on this point became so strong that he had to give up hunting altogether. Perhaps some glimmering knowledge of the future dawned on his boyish mind ; perhaps he foresaw that he, too, would one day be hunted, like the poor red fox, through the wide wastes of Galway, and perhaps ridden down as pitilessly, and flung to the yelping pack at last.

Poor great-hearted, dream-ridden Wilfrid MacNevin ! She had heard his conduct denounced as madness when it received no harsher name ; but to her who had shared his thoughts and dimly felt the splendour of his vision, he was never nobler, more truly himself than at this moment, when, a hunted

fugitive, he lay for safety among the poor Connemara peasants or the half-starved fisher-folk of the Galway coast.

She would have given much to be able to learn some tidings of him, but dared not even make the attempt. The risks were too great. Applied to in the right way, the Doctor might have helped her, for he was good-natured enough to trample over his principles and prejudices for the pleasure it gave him to serve a friend. But her aunt was entirely different.

Mrs. Smith was a woman of strong views. She was obstinate, too, clinging strenuously to her opinions. And she had made up her mind on the subject of Fenianism definitely and irrevocably.

"My dear, it's altered times with us," she used to say to Emily. "We used to be Irish, but we import our ideas now from America, and they are of low, vulgar origin. No gentleman could have anything to say to them. It's a Republic the Fenians want to force on us; we're to be governed from Washington, it appears. Well, all I can say is give me the Queen—the devil I know. Of course, meaning no disrespect to her Majesty. What's more, if I had my way, I'd clap every Fenian in the country into jail, and keep him there till he came to his right senses."

The Doctor was less outspoken on this point than his wife. He may have felt that he could trust her to say enough for both. The result justified his faith in her. She spoke so freely and to such purpose that the Doctor's household soon came to be regarded as a very stronghold of loyalty and a pattern to the gentry (not all above suspicion) of the countryside.

On an evening in September several months after her return from Dublin, Emily O'Brien sat with a book in her hand close to the window of her aunt's drawing-room, making the most of the little remaining light. It was a dull evening following an equally gloomy day, and the night threatened rain. A watery yellow streak in the sky westwards showed where the sun had set, and a pale, attenuated moon shone fitfully out of ragged masses of black, hurrying clouds. Emily shivered involuntarily whenever she raised her eyes from her book. She had been noticeably depressed of late, and the outlook was not cheering.

Suddenly the clatter of a horse's feet smote sharply on the brooding stillness, and, looking out, she beheld Captain Vaughan, mounted on his big brown charger, galloping up the drive towards the house. An exclamation of annoyance escaped her, and she sprang up instantly, intent on making her escape before

the arrival of her aunt. For the Captain's attentions had been so assiduous of late that a climax in their relations was imminent; this very evening might bring the crisis she feared. Now Vaughan was a vain man. To refuse the offer of his hand would be to convert him into a bitter enemy and mortally offend her aunt—two extremely unpleasant contingencies she strongly desired to avoid. Prudence counselled, therefore, a temporizing policy, and surely a little further dallying with hope could do nobody any harm. A loud, eager knocking on the front door at that moment doubtless hastened her decision. Laying down her book, she passed noiselessly from the room and along a narrow passage, at the end of which an open French window gave access to the garden.

Once outside and the window shut behind her, she breathed more freely, but her relief was of short duration. A sudden clamour of voices from the farther side of the laurel hedge proclaimed the presence of the children—a boisterous company at all times, and this evening evidently in a particularly unruly mood. Emily stood listening to their shrill cries for a few hesitant minutes; then, with every jarred nerve tingling, turned back into the house. There was no help for it. She must face the Captain, she thought, moving slowly down the passage to the hall.

The first thing she noticed on entering the hall was that the drawing-room door stood open. The girl had had no intention of eavesdropping, but at the first sound of the Captain's voice, raised a note higher than usual, she came to a dead pause. Then, her eyes slowly dilating with mingled surprise and terror, she softly crept close up to the door.

"Yes, one Wilfrid MacNevin—a very dangerous person," he was saying, and there was an undercurrent of excitement in his thin, drawling tones. "Information has reached the Castle that he has been seen prowling about this neighbourhood, and I hope to be on his track before many hours are over."

"Wilfrid MacNevin? The name sounds familiar," commented Mrs. Smith musingly. Then: "And will it take soldiers to catch him?" she asked, with, however, no intention of being ironical.

"Well, it isn't exactly soldiers' work, but I have been asked to assist the police, and I dare not disobey orders. I have a picked detachment of my men waiting for me now outside your gates; we must be off presently. I only just rode up to give you and Miss O'Brien the news. By the way, may I not hope to see her?"

Emily did not wait to hear the answer. Gathering up her skirts, she flew across the

hall like a pursued thing, and in another moment was back in the garden. The children were still playing under the laurel hedge, but, keeping it between them, she stole across the flower-beds, towards where a wicket gate led into a piece of waste ground lately converted into a shrubbery. Beyond lay a ragged stretch of wood covering a couple of acres.

Why she chose this way Emily did not stop to consider—possibly because it was the first that presented itself as a means of exit from the garden. Of conscious thought, of deliberate action, she was at this moment utterly incapable. She was moved only by a vague terror of betraying herself before Captain Vaughan or her aunt, and a wild desire to be the first to find MacNevin and warn him of his danger.

As she ran forward, heedlessly tearing her skirt on clutching briar or thorn, she had to press her lips tightly together to guard them from screaming his name aloud. It was maddening to think that at this very moment he might be close by with no knowledge of that grim knot of soldiers gathered yonder on the road. She could catch a glimpse of their shadowy figures through the greyness of the dusk as she hurried across the open patch of meadow between the shrubbery and the wood.

It was almost night under the trees, and

lonesome with the voices of the rising wind moaning and calling through the tossing boughs. Above her head the ghost of a moon was racing distractedly across the sky, pursued, it seemed, by a flying squadron of black clouds, and from time to time a sullen drop of rain splashed heavily against her face. The girl trembled with a shivering feeling that was not fear, but rather an eerie consciousness of the nearness of sinister, invisible things. And though brave enough by nature and tradition, she started like a timid child when a passing bat brushed her cheek with its heavy wing, and an owl screeched suddenly somewhere in the distance.

"I am a coward," she said in bitter self-disgust; then paused with a choking cry as the tall figure of a man, muffled in a long overcoat, detached itself from the shadows and stood directly in her path. The moon at that moment tore herself free from the scudding wrack of cloud and revealed them to one another.

"Is it Emily?" whispered a low, incredulous voice.

"Wilfrid! Wilfrid!"

She could not for the life of her utter a word more. The shock of his sudden appearance seemed to still her very breath. But she stumbled forward to meet the muffled figure, holding out eager hands towards it

through the darkness. And then for the space of a minute they tasted the lovers' happy privilege: they stood alone in another Eden, the outside world forgotten.

The sudden neighing of a trooper's horse broke the spell, recalled the girl to reality, sent her fears rushing back on her heart in a cold drowning flood. Wrenching her hands out of his with a hoarse cry of remembrance, she gripped him fiercely by the arm.

"What madness has taken you here, Wilfrid MacNevin? Don't you know you are a marked man? There are soldiers out there on the road, and it is you they are after. O God! You have walked straight into the trap!"

He turned upon her almost angrily.

"And what does that matter if what I have heard about you is true? They say you are to be married shortly, the news reached even my cave in the hills. Emily,"—his hand fell heavily on her shoulder—"is it true?"

She drew a little away from him, shaking off his hand with a petulant movement he remembered well.

"No!" The monosyllable was emphatic. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself to believe such idle tales?"

"But——" he began, hesitating and still unconvinced—"I heard a great deal of the beautiful Miss O'Brien in Dublin last spring: her many flirtations, her gaiety when——"

"When you should have been thinking of something more serious than old maids' gossip," she retorted severely. "Oh! you great goose! I am going to be married surely, and that to a most notorious rebel, if Providence proves kind. But"—with a fresh access of terror—"I must be as mad as yourself to stand talking here. Listen! What was that noise? It is the sound of horses' feet. They are moving. They are off. For the love of Heaven, let us get out of this at once."

She spoke in sharp, disjointed sentences, dragging him with her in a frenzy of haste along the path by which she had come. A few minutes' walking brought them to the verge of the wood.

By this time the rain, which had been falling in great sluggish drops, had increased to a steady patter. It would shortly be a downpour she feared, and the rain would drive the children indoors. They would be questioned about her, and—she knew her aunt's fussy kindness—they would be searching for her in the garden and elsewhere. There was not a moment to be lost.

Her hand dropped from MacNevin's arm.

"We have only that bit of open ground to face," she whispered, pointing to the strip of meadow. "Just walk beside me in an unconcerned way, and trust to me if we are stopped."

Nothing of the kind occurred, however.

They gained the shelter of the shrubbery unmolested, and following an unused cart-track skirting it, entered a vast enclosed yard. Outbuildings, for the most part unoccupied, filled three sides of the spacious quadrangle, which lay silent and deserted in the fitful twilight, though in former days, before the Doctor's time, it had simmered with the life and stir of a busy farm.

"Nobody ever comes here, except Jim occasionally to feed the horse," she whispered reassuringly, drawing him across the yard to the gaping doorway of the barn, whence came forth the faint fragrance of freshly-stored hay.

"You will be quite safe here till I come back," she said, pushing him into the scented darkness.

.

Doctor Smith was alone in his study, smoking a peaceful cigar after an unusually busy day. With feet on mantelpiece and chair tilted back at a comfortable angle, he had reached a stage of almost sublime enjoyment when the door opened precipitately and Emily entered the room. One look at her pale, discomposed countenance shook the Doctor out of his Elysium and brought him to his feet at once. She closed the door noiselessly behind her, laying a warning finger on her lips.

"Uncle Terence, I have something to tell you—something you won't like to hear," she began. "I——" Her voice suddenly faltered; then, breaking down altogether, she ran towards him as he rose to meet her, and hid her sobbing face in his capacious chest.

The Doctor changed colour, growing red and white by turns. Had Emily been the wildest of her sex, she could have chosen no speedier way to the soft part of his heart.

"God bless my soul! What is all this about?" he exclaimed in tones of such real concern that, gathering courage from his kindness, and from the necessity for haste, she presently found voice to tell her story.

The Doctor's anger rose as the narrative proceeded. He punctuated it with a running commentary of growling ejaculations; but he was silent when she had finished, frowning fiercely at the empty grate.

Emily looked at him alarmed.

"Oh, uncle, you will help us?" she pleaded. "If you refuse he is a lost man."

And then she fell to weeping again as if her heart would break.

It was now the Doctor should have stormed and blustered, said everything, in short, he knew his wife would have expected him to say in the circumstances, but, greatly to his own surprise, he did nothing of the kind.

"Don't cry, my dear," he said instead,

drawing her towards him, and smoothing her tangled hair with a large but very tender hand. "You'll be washing all the colour out of your eyes at this rate. There! There, now! Stop crying. Sure——" in a sudden burst of candour—"I'd hide your rebel under your aunt's very nose rather than see you taking on in this fashion."

"Uncle——"

"Hush, now! If I'm to help—and I suppose I must—at least give me time to think. It's no easy job you've set me, Emily; but—Egad! I have it!" He slapped one broad hand against the palm of the other. "I have it! It'll be the greatest joke of my life. Your aunt shall be his preserver, my dear. There's really no other way out. She'll blow the gaff on us if she isn't in the thick of it herself. Yes, we'll make her his preserver. But, good Lord! what a farce it will be!" And the Doctor fell to laughing in a queer, soundless way until the tears ran down his cheeks.

"Just give me a few minutes alone with her, and I'll do the trick," he said, when he was able to articulate again. "I'll tell her they've offered a reward of five hundred pounds for the Fenian, dead or alive, and I'll say I'm going to have a shot at it myself. That'll touch her pride. When I have worked her up to the right pitch, bring in your rebel and throw

him on her mercy. You'll find she'll rise to the occasion. There isn't a principle she wouldn't swallow to show me she's an O'Brien, every inch of her, and I'm only a mere common, mercenary Smith. Don't be afraid, Emily," as the girl looked hesitant and uneasy; "I haven't lived for five years with your aunt without knowing something of her. And I can tell you she's a fine woman at bottom."

The Doctor left the room on these words, and a little while after Emily heard his loud tones in the dining-room :

"Five hundred pounds it is—every penny of it, Alicia. Five hundred pounds for a rebel's skin ! Faith, it's the finest news I've heard this long time. Do you know, I'm half-inclined to join in the chase myself. I'm considered lucky. And it's a lot of money."

"Terence ! I am ashamed of you !"

Mrs. Smith's voice, full of shrill contempt, came to Emily as she passed the door on tip-toe, causing her heart to leap with sudden hope.

Half an hour went by. The Doctor had prudently returned to the peaceful sanctuary of his study, having almost too well succeeded in convincing his wife of his thorough capacity for meanness and greed. He left her sewing spasmodically under the lamp, fuming with indignation still, and wishing Emily would come in to share the news. Suddenly, just as

she was thinking of going in search of her, there was a patter of hasty footsteps, and the girl burst into the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Mrs. Smith looked up from her sewing with an eager smile.

"Have you heard about the Fenian?" she asked, and there was actually a tremor of excitement in her usually even tones.

To her surprise Emily answered nothing until she stood close beside her chair. Then stooping, and speaking in a rapid whisper, she said:

"He is here—under your roof. Aunt Alicia, at this moment you have a man's life and liberty in your hands. And Fenian as he is, you will not, you cannot, betray him. For you are an O'Brien, and you will be worthy of the good old name."

Mrs. Smith rose hurriedly, scarcely less agitated than her niece. In the sudden crisis she knew not what to say, and while she was still struggling with her emotion Emily made a hasty sign to somebody on the other side of the door. The shadowy figure obeyed the summons immediately, and the astonished lady found herself face to face with a tall, bearded stranger, muffled from throat to heels in a dark frieze great-coat. He stood before her with uncovered head, muddy and dishevelled, but bearing himself with a certain easy grace

of manner that did not escape her keen, searching eye. She noticed also, womanlike, that he was young and good to look upon, in spite of his pallor and the black tangle of beard disfiguring the lower part of his face.

"Aunt, this is Wilfrid MacNevin himself," Emily said, with a wave of her hand towards him. "You may look on him as an enemy, but at least he is an honourable one. And we are O'Briens, both of us. And"—she took a deep breath—"he is in our safe-keeping to-night."

She spoke in a tone of quiet dignity, no longer timid and tremulous as in her uncle's presence, but maintaining an air of proud assurance that affected her aunt's quickly-kindled imagination more powerfully than the most impassioned appeal could have done. She was quite sincere too—a fact which would have vastly increased the Doctor's enjoyment had he been a witness of the scene. So Emily would have scored all round. As it was, she saw with thankfulness that she had touched the right chord.

A flush crept into the sallow cheeks of the older woman. She drew herself up to the full height of her tall stature, every muscle stiffening with the ineradicable instinct of family pride.

"He might be in worse hands, Emily," she

answered in her stateliest manner, reserved for great occasions. "I won't say he is welcome, but for all that, our hospitality will never shame the O'Briens."

"And I haven't told you yet he is the son of Colonel MacNevin, an old friend of my father's. Surely you must have known him when you were a girl?"

Mrs. Smith's countenance lightened as it always did at any allusion to her past.

"To be sure I did. But I'd rather not think of that now. I danced with him for a whole night that summer before he went to India, in the big ballroom of Clonmore. But"—sighing—"it's many a year since then. And"—turning to MacNevin—"so you're his son. For his sake I wish we had met in other circumstances, Wilfrid MacNevin; but even if you were the black stranger I thought you were, you would be as safe in this house as when you lay in your mother's lap." And in token thereof she held out her hand.

The young man pressed it gratefully, then, with old-fashioned courtesy, carried it to his lips. The little act of homage gratified her woman's love of power.

"It's easy to see he comes of good stock," she thought, warming to him at once.

"Sit down," she said, with a sudden change of manner, "and let us see what is to be done. The Doctor is a great man for stratagems, but

his heart won't be in this business, I fear. I think we won't consult him till we have made up our minds," she added, with a roguish glance in the direction of her niece.

They were all three silent and thoughtful for the next few minutes, then Mrs. Smith broke the pause, speaking musingly, as if uttering her thoughts aloud:

"The more I look at him, Emily, the more his face reminds me of my brother, the Jesuit. If his beard was shaved off, and he had on clerical clothes he might be taken for Arthur anywhere. There's only the colour of his hair. But that's easily managed. What about those wigs we got for the theatricals? They're somewhere in a drawer upstairs. Yes; I think I have a good plan. I'll send a note down to Father Cassidy at once. He'd give every suit in his wardrobe to help a Fenian—more shame to him, I say."

Despite her last qualifying remark, Mrs. Smith sprang up, clasping her hands triumphantly, and regarding the young man with eyes that had grown wonderfully soft and kind. Now that she had taken him under her protection, it was evident that she was fast developing into as warm-hearted an ally as even Emily herself. A whole well of maternal sympathy seemed to be bubbling up in her empty heart. It would have taken a full regiment of soldiers at that moment to

tear the young Fenian out of the friendly hands of the Doctor's strictly Conservative wife.

"We'll save him between us, Emily," she declared, smiling round encouragingly as she seated herself at her bureau to indict a note to the parish priest. "Many a man the O'Briens have saved in their time—priests, most of them. And I think," she added naïvely, "I'll have less scruple about screening a rebel when I see him dressed up as a priest. I'll try to forget it's only make-believe."

A few hours later a small black box was conveyed to the Doctor's house by a trusty messenger with Father Cassidy's compliments, and next morning Mrs. Smith's brother took his place at the breakfast table, and nobody appeared in the least degree surprised. Ballyallen folk had the happy knack of taking things for granted.

Father Arthur O'Brien sojourned for a full week at the Doctor's house while the hue and cry for Wilfrid MacNevin was carried near and far. One day, when the pursuit was growing fainter, Mrs. Smith learned from Captain Vaughan—still a constant visitor—that some private business of his own would shortly take him to Cork.

"Then you'll have my brother, Father Arthur with you—how nice!" she exclaimed in a tone of pleasure. "He will be going to

Queenstown on his way to New York. 'They're sending him to America to collect funds for that new church at Killoo, and, poor fellow, he has no relish for the work. Indeed, he's inclined to be low-spirited about it, and you would be doing us all a real kindness if you would take him in charge and cheer him up a bit on the journey. He'll be going your way as far as Cork.'

Whatever the Captain's private feelings may have been, he was not likely to demur to any proposition made by Emily O'Brien's aunt. It was told of him afterwards that, in an excess of friendly zeal, he actually accompanied the priest on board the Atlantic liner, standing by his side on deck until the warning bell rang, and a hoarse voice shouted the well-known cry, "Anybody going ashore?" And who that was acquainted with Captain Vaughan could have entertained a moment's doubt as to the identity of the fair-haired, ascetic-looking young clergyman whom he so familiarly addressed as "Father Arthur?"

Shortly after Father O'Brien's departure, Emily went on a prolonged visit to friends in Dublin. Captain Vaughan, more amorous than ever, fretted and fumed impatiently in her absence, but the weeks slipped by one by one, the golden mists of autumn were replaced by the grey fogs of winter, and there was still no talk of her return.

“Any news of Miss O’Brien lately ?” he asked her aunt, almost perfunctorily, meeting her one day on the road near the town of Ballyallen. He had put the question so often before, always receiving some vague, indefinite reply.

Mrs. Smith smiled in response to his eager look ; a sudden twinkle of amusement shone in her instantly-lowered eyes.

“Haven’t you heard ?” she said demurely. “My niece has just sailed for New York to keep Christmas with Father Arthur.”

The Mistress of the Hill Farm

I

THE big, substantial-looking farmstead on the hillside was the one cheerful object in the flat, monotonous landscape lying between Mullavara and the sea. From afar its white walls and square white chimneys glimmered on the wayfarer's sight through the dark foliage of a belt of fir trees, scarred and seamed and twisted into fantastic shapes by the winds of many winters, the beating of many storms.

In front of the dwelling-house was the farmyard, flanked by long rows of out-buildings, and behind, beyond the jagged line of orchard, stretched acres and acres of rich, well-stocked pasture that wound like a broad green ribbon through the stony barrenness of the country on either side.

"Small thanks to young Brien O'Callaghan for his riches. Who could be poor on land like that?" a grudging neighbour would sometimes remark with envious glances towards the wide, cattle-dotted fields. But the parents of

marriageable maidens unanimously chorussed the young man's praises. "He deserves the best wife in the parish," they said, and each one thought he knew where to find just the right mistress for the Hill Farm.

Brien's mother, however, was in no haste to see her son married, and it was a source of considerable satisfaction to her that at thirty-five his choice of a wife still hung in the balance. A proud, masterful woman by nature, Sally O'Callaghan's long widowhood had made her so accustomed to rule that the thought of abdication was hateful to her, and the feeling deepened with advancing years.

"Not in my time, not in my time," she would angrily reply to the cautious overtures of a match-making neighbour. "While I live there will only be one mistress on the Farm."

As for Brien himself, he showed such amazing indifference on the subject that, much to the disgust of the match-makers, it seemed likely enough Sally would have her way.

"It must be a bit of a stone God gave the poor boy in place of a heart," indignant mothers at length decided as the only possible explanation of his long resistance to the rosy charms of their daughters.

There came a day, however, when the spell of Brien's indifference was broken. As at some fairy's bidding, the stone suddenly transformed itself into a warm, living heart. But the fairy

was only little Rosie Meehan, and this wonder was wrought by no magic other than that of her deep, soft eyes.

Rosie was by no means a "fine girl" as the Mullavara folk understood the term. She was small and slender, and frail as a white winter blossom, with slim, tapering hands like a lady's, and a graceful, almost proud carriage of the little golden head.

"Just a bit of a crathur you could blow away from you with one breath," the women pronounced contemptuously, and the men were wisely silent, letting the women have their way. The truth was, that although her fragile beauty made no appeal to their senses, their hearts were vaguely troubled by a consciousness of the girl's exceeding charm. Wherein lay its exact secret was a puzzle to them all, its quality being too subtle and elusive for analysis by these simple peasant minds. It was just a way she had with her, they decided, a sweet, indescribable, and wholly dangerous way, considering her utter undesirability from the matrimonial, that is to say, the only practical, point of view. On that question there could be no two opinions, for Rosie Meehan was not as other, happier girls.

Rosie had neither father nor mother, nor a single known blood relation, nor even a right to the name she bore. She was a foundling, and in this country of stern morality tradition

had set an everlasting shame-mark on the nameless abandoned child.

To love Rosie, therefore, was to be guilty of extremest folly, a species of folly, too, not lightly condoned by Mullavara. Love, indeed ! That was all very well in the tales and legends passed from mouth to mouth in the firelight, or the ballads crooned in the chimney-corner of a winter's night ; in ordinary life there were other things to be thought of ; Brien O'Callaghan was a very foolish man. But Brien flung opinion to the winds, and he was his own master. Nothing could stand between him and his heart's desire.

"Lord, save us ! There'll be cruel trouble up at the Hill Farm now," old friends murmured anxiously, as, indeed, trouble there was.

"That girl of the Meehans ! Never whilst I'm above ground !" screamed Sally O'Callaghan, turning a face distorted with passion on her son. "I tell ye, Brien, ye'll have to carry me out feet foremost the day she comes in that door."

It was in vain Brien sought to appease her. Sally fought for her kingdom with all the ferocity of a tigress defending her lair.

"A foundlin' !" she repeated over and over again, in a tone of withering contempt. "Ill got an' ill brought up, too, her mind crammed with Peggy Meehan's crazy notions. The walk of her ! An' the proud set of her head !

It's first cousin to her Ladyship up at the Castle she might be, judgin' from her airs."

"God help poor Rosie! It's nature gave her that walk, not pride, mother," Brien said with a smile. "But who knows what she may be? You know what Peggy Meehan thinks."

"Peggy Meehan!" Mrs. O'Callaghan laughed scornfully. "Don't talk of Peggy to me! Wasn't I in her house the night she found the child under the thorn bush in the meadow beyond the forth? An' wasn't it on my knee she laid it down afore the fire? Saints in Glory! I wish I'd been as wise then as I am now, an' I'd have choked it dead the moment I got her back turned."

"Mother! Mother!"

"Aye, do I wish it. But—the fool I was!—I rubbed the life back into its cold limbs an' cuddled it again' my breast. For 'twas perished the crathur was, with nothin' between its bits of babby clothes an' the night air but a flimsy white shawl."

"A silk shawl, mother, as soft and fine as a spider's web. A lady's shawl and no mistake—so Peggy says."

"A lady's shawl! An' what would ye have that prove?"

Sally's tone was defiant. Her eyes challenged his in the firelight; they gleamed with unutterable scorn.

"As if a lady's shawl couldn't be had for the stalin'! You're as bad as Peggy herself. 'Twas that same shawl turned her brain. She'd have it the child belonged to gentlefolk, however it came on the world. I think she misdoubted some of the quality up at the Castle, an', to say the thruth, they were a wild lot in them days. All the same, 'twas a far-fetched notion she had. Barney had more sinse. He was for sendin' the child to the workhouse, but Peggy said its gran' relations would be sure to claim it some day, an' then 'twould be worth its weight in gold. She had a terrible timper an' always got her own way in everything. Barney was sthricken for death, poor fellow, or he might have made a bettther fight."

"Sure, I know the story well, mother; I know it very well."

"She kept the child," went on Peggy, unheeding the interruption; "an' nothin' was too good for Rosie whilst she was a slip of a girsha growin' up. I don't know how she's thrated now, for"—bitterly—"the gran' relations haven't come for her yit."

"And may they never come, mother! But Peggy's still expecting them every day."

"The crazy ould fool! As if anybody, high or low, ever claimed a foundlin'! I always said her head was turned with envy an' greed. Sure, Rosie owes her no thanks at all. There's not a single streak of good nature in her whole body."

"Maybe so, maybe so. Sure, what do I care, mother?"

The note of impatient weariness in Brien's voice was obvious. Sally shot a keen glance at his troubled countenance, then her hard eyes softened.

"This girl will bring us sorrow, Brien. Couldn't ye thry to forget her?" she asked, and her tone was almost gentle.

"She's not the sort of girl a man forgets so easily."

"A man might thry. An' she couldn't look for to hould you, you that can pick an' choose among the best."

"I did choose the best, mother," said Brien.

"The best!" The old woman gasped. Two round spots of colour appeared in her cheeks; her mouth began to quiver piteously, but she looked at her son's set face and gulped down her tears.

"Maybe if you wint away for a while ye might forget her," she suggested.

Brien smiled ruefully.

"And where could I go, mother, that the thought of her wouldn't follow me?"

There was a touch of fatalism in the answer that startled Sally vaguely. What had come to the boy at all? She regarded him for a moment in puzzled silence, then flung out her arms with a loud wail.

“ Ah, sure enough, 'tis bewitched he is !
My son ! My son ! ”

For the next few minutes the sound of her passionate sobbing echoed drearily through the room.

Sally O'Callaghan was a woman of conspicuously few emotions. Brien had never known her to break down in this way before, and the sight was inexpressibly painful to him. It was terrible to have to let her weep on un-comforted, but what was there he could say that would not increase her grief ? As he stood there watching her in embarrassed silence, a feeling of exasperation grew up within him against the fate which was driving him contrary to his mother's will. The scene was fast becoming intolerable when, on a sudden, there came the welcome interruption of a knock at the house door. Sally at once pulled down the apron she had flung over her face, drying her eyes on a corner of it, while Brien went hurriedly into the porch. He came back a moment later with an open telegram in his hand.

“ Uncle James is dead, mother,” he said solemnly, and, as by a common impulse, they sat down opposite one another in their accustomed places at either side of the hearth.

Sally took up her apron again and gave a final dab to her eyes. There was a curious

briskness in her movements that communicated itself to her voice when she spoke.

"Well, God rest his sowl!" she prayed almost cheerfully. "Sure, he wasn't the sort ye'd have the heart to wish back again. Them ould bachelors are lonesome crathurs no matter how much money they have. James'll have more company where he's gone to."

They were both silent for the next few minutes. Then Sally spoke again:

"'Twas a powerful big business he had, Brien—as fine as any in Dublin City. An' it'll have to come to you now: there's nobody else for it."

"'Tis always the way. More comes to them that have too much already."

Brien looked away from her to stare gloomily into the fire.

"They'll be wantin' you at once, Brien, I'm thinkin'."

"So this says"—indicating the telegram. "But what can I do that others can't do as well for me?"

"Others!" Sally turned on him furiously. "It was niver the way of the O'Callaghans to lave their work to strangers. That's not how they gathered money about them, let me tell you, Brien."

The young man had flushed and frowned impatiently while Peggy was speaking; he sprang up now and seized his hat.

"Dublin isn't next door to us, mother. God

knows what may happen whilst I'm away. You don't understand things at all. You may cast what scorn you please on Rosie, that doesn't hinder Peggy from thinking me no match for the girl, and——” He broke off, hesitated, then added, with his hand on the latch of the door, “I'm not my own master now; it's Rosie must settle this herself.”

The old woman's face became livid.

“Rosie! Always Rosie! The white-faced witch,” she hissed under her breath. “A murrain on her, night an' day! She has stolen away my son!”

And when the door had closed upon Brien, Sally's wrath against him burst out like a loosened flood. She began to walk up and down with weak, hurrying steps, wringing her hands as one distraught.

To put this affront upon her in her old age: to set up a new mistress in her place—that would have been hard enough to bear. But to thrust her on one side for a foundling whose proper home was the workhouse!—the old woman's face grew murderous at the thought. It was not for this she had stood in the way of her son's marrying, though the pick of the parish was spread out at his feet. Sally felt as if the disgrace must kill her. All at once the air of the cabin seemed choking; she staggered to the door, and sat down gasping for breath on the stone bench outside.

It was a fine autumn night, warm for the time of year, with a subtle scent of decay stealing through the pungent reek of the smouldering field fires. Above the shoulder of the hill a young moon was creeping; the dark reaches of meadow and pasture were turning to silver in the growing light. Down there were many moving cattle-shapes, sleek, well-fed beasts, most of them bred on the farm and reared by her own hand. And sheep dotted the sheltered enclosure in the hollow; a tinkling of bells came up the hillside every time the wethers moved. The yard before her was full of pleasant sounds too: the rustling of dry straw in the calves' shed, the rattle of a chain from the kennel, the tramping of munching horses in the stalls.

The old woman looked about her with the conscious pride of ownership. She had spent the best part of a lifetime here, planning and working incessantly from morning until night. And though the life was a hard one, the sense of power sustained her. It was a fine thing to be somebody of consequence—the Mistress of the Hill Farm.

But all that already belonged to the past; her long reign was nearly over. Brien might say what he liked, she knew sons well. The young wife's will was always law. There would be only the chimney-corner left her once that white-faced foundling crossed her floor.

The old woman sprang to her feet in a sudden paroxysm of rage, and shook her fist in the direction of the little cabin on the roadside wherein Rosie Meehan had been reared.

"My curse on her early an' late, forever! She has stolen away my boy!"

The outburst was too much for Sally's strength. She sank back trembling on the bench, conscious of her growing weakness, of the lonely burthen of her age. And with this consciousness came a sick need of comfort, of her son. Whatever happened, she must not let his love go from her. Like the stretching fields and the sleek cattle, it was part of her rightful possessions, which must be kept at any cost.

"I'll thry what the soft word can do with him," she thought. "'Twas ever aisy to melt an O'Callaghan."

So when, a couple of hours later, Brien came back she met him with a kiss. Brien had not been kissed by his mother since his childhood, and the touch of her withered lips stirred him strangely now.

"Mother, I'll do your bidding; I'll go," he said, kissing her back heartily, and there was a ring of relief in his voice which Sally noticed with surprise. But the truth was, life had become so difficult to Brien that this journey presented itself as a welcome respite from his

present worries, perhaps even a sort of half-way house towards ultimate peace.

"Yes, mother, I'll go," he repeated, adding with a tinge of vexation: "Anyhow, Rosie wouldn't say the word to hinder me."

Rosie again! The flush of pleasure died out of the old woman's face, and her eyes darkened with an expression of deadly hate. But Brien was not observant, and her back was towards the fire. When she moved into the light again, the strange look was gone.

II

A week later Brien went to Dublin. The word that might have stayed him was not spoken, for Rosie knew he wished to please his mother, and pride forbade her to keep him against his will. But Dublin seemed a long way off to the dwellers in this wild western region, and winter, the lonely western winter, was close at hand. Rosie's heart began to sicken with a sense of boding ill.

She shivered through their farewell meeting, silent and depressed. To her morbid fancy, the night about them was filled with omens of gloom and sorrow; there were wailing voices among the reeds and rushes in the hollow, and a sound of weeping in the rustle of the leaves.

"The wind is sharp to-night," said un-

imaginative Brien, feeling her tremble against his side, and Rosie assented drearily. Of what use trying to make him understand. Even had his sympathies been keener, it would still have been difficult to explain the nature of her fears. They hung about her in shadowy phantom outlines, fading, phantomwise, whenever she strove to give them shape. "I am afraid to be left alone," she might have said, but pride drove back the words. She looked up at him wistfully from time to time. They were standing full in the white flow of the moonlight—could he not read the misery in her eyes? Brien's wits were dull, however, where women were concerned. Her silence began to strike him as indifference. "She doesn't care whether I go or stay," he thought. "My mother is right. Peggy is turning her head."

And so they parted with a secret feeling of dissatisfaction on both sides. Brien's kiss lay strangely cold on Rosie's lips, and he never once turned his head for a backward look at the little still figure as he went slowly up the hills towards the glimmering lights of the Farm.

Brien had been only a short while gone when Rosie began to notice a subtle difference in the neighbours. It was not that they were outwardly less civil to her than formerly, but the old friendliness appeared to have suddenly

vanished out of all their faces : she was, somehow, made to feel herself an outsider, a stranger amongst them, for the first time. And as the days went on the change in their manner towards her became more marked. She had no active unkindness to complain of, however. They merely drew further and further away from her, until even unsuspicious Rosie could not avoid seeing that she was being quietly but surely forced into a sort of shivering isolation from which her pride told her there was no present means of escape. It was as though a ring of ice were forming itself about her ; she could feel the cold of it creeping up into her heart.

“ What’s the matter with you at all, girl ? ” Peggy asked her one day, after a keen glance at the sharpened outline of the little white face. “ How did ye get that cough ? Was it loiterin’ on the road to watch for Mick-the-Post ? ”

“ Oh, I have it a long time—since that wet day in the bog. But sure, it’s nothing at all,” Rosie answered, with the supreme indifference of youth to such trivial matters as mere questions of bodily health. She had other things to trouble about, she thought, besides a winter cold. For she had had no news of Brien since his departure, though he had faithfully promised to write to her, and Brien was a good scholar and ready with his pen.

Every day, as Peggy had noticed, she slipped out of doors at the hour the postman might be expected to pass; and every day her heart throbbed into her throat with a fresh leap of expectancy when she caught the sound of his heavy footsteps coming clattering up the road. But his eyes never took the direction of the cabin; there was no slackening of his rapid pace as he neared the door. Then Rosie's heart sank, sick with another day's disappointment, and she slunk like a wounded thing into the shelter of the wayside hedge.

It seemed long to have to wait for his reappearance on the morrow, but there was nothing else to be done. The post-office lay on the other side of Mullavara, and to reach it she would have to traverse the whole length of the straggling village street. Better any suspense than that, she thought, with a vivid recollection of the loafing figures in the doorways, the many curious, unfriendly eyes.

Usually, when he had passed the cabin, Mick followed the road that led straight down into the valley; but sometimes Rosie saw him turn into the beaten track that went winding up the hill. Then she knew he carried a letter for Sally O'Callaghan; she knew, too, there was only one person to write to Sally—that was her son. So Brien did not forget his mother! It was only for Rosie's claim he had no time to spare! The thought was full of bitterness.

Crouching there in the hedgeway, while the climbing figure went higher and higher, she felt that it needed but Brien's neglectful silence to make the frozen circle of her solitude complete. And then a great sense of loneliness settled upon her—a desolation too deep for words. For the first time she felt an almost anguished need of womanly tenderness, of a love strong enough to follow her through the dark ways of life. She sometimes looked at her foster-mother appealingly, but Peggy's scowling features gave little promise of sympathy, and the words she might have uttered died unspoken on her lips. Then the cramped space of the little cabin and Peggy's constant presence became intolerable to her, and, on the first opportunity, she would slip out, unperceived, into the wide, friendly fields.

There was one spot in particular she liked to visit—that was the corner of the meadow where, under the great bush, Peggy had found her wailing in the storm. She would sit here for hours, trying to picture the mother who had abandoned her, whose love she had never known, and she always saw her young and fair and innocent, with a face like the sweet Madonna's above the Lady altar in the village chapel.

A little half-witted boy, to whom Rosie had often been kind, sometimes came and sat beside her under the thorn bush. He seldom

spoke to her, but babbled to himself incessantly in a sing-song monotone that scarcely disturbed her thoughts. After a while, however, silence fell on him too. He would sit as motionless as Rosie herself, his vague eyes fixed on her constantly with the dumb affection of a dog. There were times when a gleam of intelligence flickered across his vacant countenance, and a look of puzzled trouble came into his eyes.

"White, white," he would say, gently stroking Rosie's pale cheeks. "White, white," he would repeat with a sorrowful shake of the head.

Once or twice the rain came down and found them there together, and then it was the idiot boy forced Rosie to rise, and led her home by the hand, like a child.

"So that's how the could gets worse an' worse till ye're fit for nothin' but a sick bed," grumbled Peggy, on one of these occasions. "Look at the face of you! Like a corpse. It's about time for yer own relations to come an' look after ye, I'm thinkin', for if throuble was to come on us, it's little help we might expect from the neighbours now."

"What have they all again' me? One'd think I'd done something very wicked," Rosie said one day, a longing for comfort suddenly breaking down the barriers of her habitual reserve.

Peggy chuckled with a sort of grim satisfaction; then a scowl settled between her brows.

"An' so you have. Ye cast yer eyes on the best match in the county, Rosie, an' that's enough to make enemies for you undher every roof in Mullavara. 'Twas bad luck Brien O'Callaghan brought into this house. Who's to give us a day's work now, I'd like to know? There's not one of the neighbours would let you inside her door for fear of offendin' Sally O'Callaghan."

The trouble in the old woman's countenance mirrored itself in Rosie's anxious eyes.

"Maybe Brien will be coming back soon," she was beginning, with a timid effort at cheerfulness, but Peggy checked her with a furious gesture of the hand.

"Don't mintion Brien O'Callaghan to me! The cur! Skulkin' off, an' lavin' you to face it all, the moment his mother gives him the hard word. A poor sort of sweetheart for any girl, an' no match for the likes of you, Rosie. Plaze God I'll live to see the day ye'll be lookin' down on him an' his from the inside of yer own carriage."

"Oh, whisht! Whisht!" entreated Rosie. "It breaks my heart to hear you talkin' in that way. I'm sore afraid you'll be disappointed. Sure, if them that owned me weren't dead, I wouldn't be left without word or sign from

them all these long years. No mother would forget her child. And it's my mother herself I want more than anybody in the world now. What's riches to me ? I never cared for money one bit."

" But I do."

The old woman came close to Rosie, her small, greedy eyes blazing savagely, her yellow teeth showing between the bloodless lips drawn back from them like those of a snarling dog. " How dare ye thry to take the hope out of my heart with your croakin' words ! I care for money if you don't ! Why else would I have burthened myself with the like of you ? A child nobody else'd look at ! Do ye think it was for nothin' I stood between ye an' the workhouse ? "

" The workhouse ! " Rosie recoiled as though the words had been a blow, and the colour rushed into her face.

" Would they have sent me to the workhouse ? " she asked in a tone scarcely raised above a whisper.

Peggy gave a short laugh.

" Aye, would they. There's little place for a ' found child ' at anybody's hearth, for there's no tellin' what bad drop may be in it, an' mothers have their own dacent childer to think of. Oh, I can tell ye, ye've no call to forget all I've done for ye. But I want no thanks ; an' ye may be as independant as ye

like if ye can tell me who's goin' to pay me for all my trouble."

She paused for breath, looking provocatively at the shrinking girl. Nothing would have pleased her better than a quarrel in her present mood. But Rosie did not speak. Her silence caused Peggy to flare up again.

"What I want to know is, who's going to pay me?" she demanded in a high, shrill key. "Not yer fine Brien O'Callaghan anyhow. If he cared a thraneen for ye, he'd never let his mother go up an' down the country settin' all the neighbours again' us, an' cursin' you for a foundlin' brat."

She paused again, glaring angrily, then a trifle apprehensively, at the girl's white, expressionless face. Rosie stood rigid as a carved image, her wide eyes fixed on vacancy; there was no gleam of life in their glassy stare.

"Rosie!"

There was sudden terror in Peggy's voice. She sprang towards the girl and caught her in her arms. Rosie slid heavily through them, and sank face downwards on the floor.

"She never could stand rough treatment. It's the good blood in her showin' itself," said Peggy. And though frightened now to the point of forgetting her recent anger, there was some measure of comfort in the thought.

III

The cold, dark autumn had wept itself away amid the flutter of falling leaves and the ceaseless lament of the wind. Winter stood in its place now, a winter of more than ordinary severity. The blighting frost that had stripped the trees of their last clinging draperies had already clothed the naked boughs with a soft hoary mantle, and covered the pools and ponds in the valley with a polished floor of ice.

Sally O'Callaghan went up the road leading from Mullavara, wrapped in her cloak of warm winter cloth, her old puckered face set defiantly against the piercing wind. She had been down to the post-office, for she knew there would be a letter for her from Brien, and in this region of limited correspondence the postman only made a single round in the twenty-four hours. Sally's impatience, however, would not let her wait until the morrow. She held the precious missive close to her bosom now with one jealous hand, but there was no light of pleasure in her eyes, no hurry of anticipation in her slow, halting pace. She looked many years older than on the day her son left Mullavara.

Not far from her own dwelling she was accosted by a decently-clad woman, coming from the opposite direction, walking carefully

to shield the full jug of milk she was carrying from the onslaught of the whirling blast.

"That's bad news about Rosie Meehan," were the latter's first words after the usual "God save ye's" had been interchanged. "'Tis in a poor way of doin' she is entirely. The doctor says it's a chill has settled on her chest. God help her an' Peggy!" She glanced at the jug of milk, and then deprecatingly at the Mistress of the Hill Farm. "Sure we must be neighbourly in times of throuble," she said in a tone of apology; "else the poor would all be lost."

Sally nodded.

"'Tis a good sintiment, Mollie Carroll, an' it does ye credit. But I must be movin'. This wind's as sharp as a knife to ould bones."

And nodding again, she pursued her way at a truly wonderful pace for a woman of her years.

Night had fallen, moonless and dark, by the time she had climbed the brow of the hill; she had to grope her way up the yard to the lighted space before her own door. Her hand was on the latch at last, much to her relief, for she was very tired, when there came a sound of heavy breathing close beside her. The old woman started, peering nervously into the shadows.

"Rosie Meehan is bad, mortal bad," whimpered a voice, and Patsey Furlong, the half-

witted boy, shuffled forward into the light. The poor fellow was trembling with cold and misery, the rags and tatters of his worn jacket fluttered about him in the blast; but his forlorn aspect did not touch the old woman's heart.

"Get out of the way, ye whining imp," she exclaimed in a voice of anger, giving Patsey a vigorous push that sent him reeling back into the darkness. Then she raised the latch, and entered the house, closing the door behind her.

The farmhouse kitchen had never looked more cheerful than on this chill December night. Scarcity of fuel there might be elsewhere, but here a great fire of peat filled the ample chimney-place, its ruddy light flickering among the wide flitches of bacon and the strings of brown onions depending from the rafters, and gleaming on the rows of polished pewter that glittered on the whitewashed wall. Sally looked round her with an appreciative eye. Coming from the cold and gloom without into this warm atmosphere of comfort, she felt more than ever proud to be mistress of such a home.

"Forty years mistress here," she muttered, throwing Brien's letter on the table, and divesting herself of her cloak. "Forty years! Must I give up the keys at last?"

Her big straw chair stood invitingly at one

side of the fire ; she sank into it, wearily dropping her chin on one hand.

The old woman's thoughts were far from pleasant as she sat there in the firelight, the leaping flames outlining with pitiless severity the lines and wrinkles of her shrivelled, time-worn face.

Now and then her glance wandered uneasily towards the letter on the table, but all her previous desire to open it appeared to have vanished. There might be bad news in it, she thought fearfully, and she had had enough already to give her a sleepless night. Not, of course, that she had heard of Rosie Meehan's illness that evening for the first time ; but hitherto she had been able to treat it as a mere hoax of Peggy's to bring Brien back. At present, however, she was obliged to think differently. There could be no doubt at all that Rosie's illness had suddenly taken a serious turn, as the villagers had made haste to inform her ; for the news had been brought into the village by Father Delany's servant, Thady, and the latter had it on the authority of "his reverence" himself. 'Twould take a miracle to save her, he had told Thady. "But why," asked the gossips, "should a miracle be worked for poor little Rosie Meehan ?" Aye, it was "poor Rosie" in everybody's mouth now, Sally thought bitterly. As if they hadn't all hated her only a week ago !

But that was the way with the neighbours : a soft-hearted lot ! As easily melted as a bit of candle before the fire. They would be fussing in and out of the Meehans' cabin now, as if they never could do half enough for Rosie, and there would be a great loosening of tongues. And nobody knew better than Peggy how to draw them out ; they would be all talking ; many things would be said.

Sally sprang up in something like panic, and going over to the dresser, pulled out a letter from behind the pieces of crockery on a lower shelf. The glowing stack of peat on the hearth gave forth a brilliant glare like the light of many candles. Sally held the letter up close to her eyes, noticing how plain the post-mark was. It bore a date now nearly six weeks old. The superscription was in her son's big, angular handwriting :

“ MISS ROSIE MEEHAN,
“ Mullavara.”

The old woman read the name aloud, gloom gathering and deepening on her brow ; then starting apprehensively at the sound of her own voice, hurriedly replaced the letter on the shelf and went slowly back to the fire.

“ Well, they can't say I opened it or ever read a line of it,” she muttered. “ The seal will tell them that. Nor did I ask the post-misthress for it, beyond sayin' I'd be passin' ”

close to Rosie Meehan's door. 'Twas herself thrust it on me—that I can swear. An' was I goin' to be Rosie's letther-carrier? The girsha might have gone to the post-office, as I did, an' asked for her own letthers, only she was afraid to look dacent people in the face."

But Sally's attempted bravado was short-lived, for none knew better than she the value such a defence would have in the honest eyes of her son. She could picture the contempt that would rise to them, and the chilly old blood ran colder in her veins. Six weeks since he went, she reflected: it had seemed a long, long time. Brien had not expected to be away beyond a month, but lawyer folk were not to be hurried, she knew, being not like other people: it paid them best to be slow. As for herself, though the winter evenings were very lonely in the silence of this solitary hillside farm, and though she had longed for her son's cheery presence many and many a time these six weeks, to-night the mere prospect of his return brought the cold sweat to her brow.

"God kape him far from here!" she prayed, her glance unconsciously seeking the unopened letter from Brien still lying on the table where she had flung it down on her entrance. She had but to stretch out her hand to reach it, and looking at it now, a sudden desire seized her to open it, and so end this torturing suspense.

“It will have to be read some time,” she said, drawing it towards her, and resolutely breaking the seal. It took Sally several minutes to master the meaning of the few hastily-scrawled lines ; then a cry of terror burst from her. Brien was coming home ! No wonder she had dreaded to read the letter ! His business was finished at last, he wrote, and she might expect him any day now. Sally tossed the letter from her with a petulant gesture, and began rocking herself to and fro, and whimpering like a child.

To think that Brien should come back just when Rosie was so ill ! Was there ever anything so untoward ? And he said any day—why, that might mean to-morrow ! What was to be done ?

For the first time in her long life fear took possession of Sally O’Callaghan ; for the first time brain and courage alike failed her in the hour of need. At this moment she could not tell whether she wished Rosie to live or die. In either case her son would be lost to her, she supposed drearily, and she would be left alone and loveless in the twilight of her days. If all this had happened earlier she would not have despaired. Danger had always been as a spur to her (her wet eyes scintillated suddenly) ; they should not have beaten her without a hard struggle. But now——

“I’m too ould,” she sobbed ; “too ould.”

The great fire smouldered and crumbled to pieces ; the kitchen gradually fell into gloom. The hands of the clock moved on from minute to minute and from hour to hour, but Sally had sobbed herself into a sort of stupor, lying back in her ample chair. It was close on midnight when a sound of footsteps vaguely reached her hearing. Then the door flew open, and a whirl of wind rushed through the room, raising a cloud of ashes above the hearth. A flame sprang up among the smouldering embers, and Sally awoke with a start.

“ Rosie Meehan is dyin’ ! ” A voice bore the words towards her from the doorway. Sally crossed herself and rose from her chair.

“ Rosie Meehan is dyin’ ! ” There was menace in the voice this time, and the idiot boy’s face flashed at her for a moment, deathly white against the background of gloom. But only for a moment. Terror gave sudden suppleness to Sally’s old limbs ; she sprang forward, and hurling herself against the door, slammed it to in the teeth of the wind. But her teeth were chattering, and she shook from head to foot.

Rosie Meehan dying ! Mother of God, what news was this ! Rosie dying, and Brien expected home any day ! What was to be done ?

She lit the lamp and trimmed the fire mechanically, all the time racking her brain

to devise some plan to meet this strait. But her thoughts went whirling away from her in dizzy, unceasing circles; she felt like one groping after fleeting objects through the impenetrable dark. On the window-shelf lay her rosary beads. She took them up with a vague hope of finding help in the familiar prayers, then laid them down again after a distracted "Ave": no, she could not even pray to-night. And once more an overwhelming sense of helplessness seized the old woman. This time, however, she fought against it, angrily telling herself that something must be done, and that speedily, for to-morrow might be too late.

The thought stirred her sluggish mind to a fresh effort, and out of the chaos of her ideas one pressing fear emerged: Peggy Meehan had always envied and hated her, and in Peggy's savage temper lay her greatest danger now. For, if Rosie were to die, Peggy's hopes would die with her—all the dreams of future grandeur she had cherished for so many years. And Peggy would not bear disappointment tamely: the woman's fierce nature would crave for instant vengeance, and a bitter one for sure.

Sally began to cry again—the tears were always very near her eyes of late. Peggy would accuse her of Rosie's death, and Brien would never forgive her. Didn't she know

the O'Callaghans well? Happiness might sometimes soften them, but sorrow hardened their hearts. And Peggy's poisoned tongue would be ever set like a sword between mother and son.

But would Rosie die? Hadn't the priest said a miracle might save her? A sudden thrill of hope went through the old woman's heart. Jumping up from her chair, she ran to the dresser and snatched the unopened letter to Rosie from behind the big willow-patterned dish.

"I must be quick," she muttered feverishly. "I must be quick."

Her cloak hung on the back of a chair; she hastily threw it about her shoulders and made for the door. An instant later she was stumbling down the hill, despite her age and weariness, beating her way defiantly through the storm.

She was breathless with the haste she had made by the time she reached the Meehans' cabin. A bright light shone in one of the little four-paned windows, but all was very silent within. Sally's heart was thumping heavily against her ribs, and she had to summon a sort of desperate courage before venturing to knock upon the closed door. There was a moment's suspense, then the door opened, and Peggy stood on the threshold.

"Is that Sally O'Callaghan I see?" she asked, and her voice had an ominous tone.

"It's me, sure enough. Let me in quick," Sally gasped. "I've brought a cure with me for Rosie—a bettther one than any she'll get in the doctor's physic. Let me in," she repeated imploringly, holding up the letter as a passport for admission, for Peggy's inflexible figure still barred the way.

The latter hesitated a moment, her eyes glued on the letter Sally held towards her; then:

"You may come in," she said sullenly. "If ye've a mind to see Rosie, I'll not hindher ye."

The kitchen into which Sally stepped was in darkness save for the feeble glimmer of a dying wood fire, but a light shone through the half-open door of the small bed-chamber beyond. Quickly crossing the kitchen, Sally paused before the lighted threshold, her breath catching in her throat with a dry, rustling sound. Then beating down her emotion, she pushed the door wide and resolutely entered the room. "Rosie." The name uttered timidly, lost itself in a loud scream.

"Aye, there she is! Look at her well!" And Peggy pointed to the bed with a brown, claw-like hand. "Look at what's left of Rosie, an' raise a cry of joy over her. 'Tis you an' yours have laid her low."

Peggy's voice had a terrible sound; her lips were drawn back tightly from the sharp yellow teeth, and her glance, fiercely significant,

never wandered from the letter in the other's hand. But Sally showed no sign of shrinking ; in one moment her whole demeanour had changed ; all her old courage seemed to have come back.

Without answering, without appearing even to hear, she quietly stepped up to the bed and looked down at its still occupant. Amid the rude white draperies in the flickering candle-glare the girl lay sleeping, her folded hands clasping a small wooden crucifix, the beads of a rosary twisted about her slender wrists. Sally stood for a while lost in thought, then stooping, gently loosed the cold ivory fingers, and slipped Brien's letter between them beside the wooden cross. And then, drawing back from the bed, she glanced at Peggy askance.

"Ye've had yer fill of throuble, for 'tis a hard time of year for sickness, God knows," she said. "An' indade I noticed, comin' in, there wasn't a sod of turf on the fire. An' it such a terrible night ! Sure, neighbours should be neighbourly in such times as this. An' maybe if I was to show a good example, there's others 'ud follow it. Now there's that bit of bog in the hollow poor Barney always coveted, an' small blame to the man, seein' he hadn't as much as what he could stick a spade in of his own. Well, Peggy, if it'll help ye, I'm willin' to give ye all the turf ye can cut on it for the next twelve months. Sure, we'll not

miss it ; it's too much we have for our wants already."

Sally spoke in the detached tone of one treating of unimportant matters, but her eyes sought Peggy's now with an eager question in them. Peggy's face, however, was not an encouraging sight. It had grown darker—if possible more movelessly malignant than before.

"Well, now I come to think of it," went on Sally hurriedly, "there's another thing I can do for sake of her that's gone. Sure, with all that fine grazin' of ours we can afford to help an ould neighbour. Put a bullock on it to fatten with ours as soon as ye like. An', of coorse, it's the bit of fresh butther an' the drop of new milk ye'll be always welcome to as long as I'm to the fore." She paused, eyeing Peggy dubiously ; then, gulping down her unwillingness with a considerable effort, added firmly, "There's just wan other word I have to say, Peggy, an' then I'm done. I know ye've long fancied the white cow that Brien called 'Rosie'; well, I'll make you a present of her last calf. It's a heifer an' a beauty forbye—ye may send for it to-morrow. Brien won't like me to give it to ye, for ye're no favourite of his at all, Peggy. But"—slowly and with intense meaning—"so long as he has the same wish for me as he has now, so long as he has the same opinion of me, he'll never seek to break his mother's word."

While Sally was speaking, the scowling blackness of the other's countenance broke up gradually, and a gleam of satisfaction shone in her alert, covetous eyes. As Sally ceased, she turned with an air of assumed indifference to snuff the candles, beginning to gutter in the draught; then, making a sign to her companion, led the way back to the kitchen.

For a few painful minutes there was silence between the two old women. Peggy had seated herself on a stool near the fire; Sally, still wrapped in her cloak, leaned, trembling with suppressed excitement, against the rugged, smoke-stained wall.

At length Peggy spoke.

"It was a release," she said, somewhat inconsequently, pointing over her shoulder to the room beyond. "Sure, 'twas only a little white shadow she was—not fit for this world at all."

A Slum Tragedy

ON a bleak afternoon in mid-January Hope Street was, if possible, more cheerless than its wont. A drab-coloured sky hung low over the smoke-stained chimney-tops of its double row of dirty, mean-looking houses ; a cutting wind careering down the street drove the sleet before it in fierce, intermittent gusts. There had been a sharp frost on the previous night, followed by a thaw, and now mud lay everywhere—in the narrow roadway, on the filthy pavements—cold, sticky mud that clung to the feet of the passers, making their progress still more difficult against the blinding storm.

Nancy Nugent, the applewoman, shivered under her cloak of heavy homespun every time the biting draught blew through the squalid archway in whose sorry shelter she had placed her stall. She had sat there patiently since early morning, growing more and more benumbed with cold as the hours went on, yet loth to leave her post while daylight lasted, for the street was hardly more cheerless than her cold garret room, and she could

only allow herself the luxury of a fire at night.

Times were very bad with Nancy, had been so ever since the severe attack of rheumatism a couple of winters back, which had left her partially crippled, and no longer fit for any sort of active manual work. Looking at the little bent, shrunken figure, it was hard to realise that only a decade ago, when she first came to London, there had been a colour in her withered cheeks to match the birdlike brightness of her eyes, and she had walked with the free gait of the peasant used to stretching country spaces and the springy heather-carpet of the hills. Now the new conditions had done their work, and ten years passed in this city of fierce realities, of never-ending struggle, had sufficed to transform the sturdy Wexford peasant into a decrepit old woman, feebler than her own grandmother had been at four-score-and-ten. But her eyes remained unaltered. All the life left in the feeble frame seemed to burn in their steady, watchful light.

As night approached the cold grew in bitter intensity. Under the archway the east wind swept, keen as the sharp blade of a knife. The street became very quiet. A hoarse roar in the distance proclaimed the neighbourhood of a busy thoroughfare, but here the silence was broken only by the tread of a slip-

shod foot on the slushy pavement, the tinkle of a passing muffin-bell, or the jingle of a milk-cart on its afternoon round.

There would be no more customers this evening, Nancy thought, looking up to nod at a ragged man pushing a heavy barrow before him, who stopped to greet her as he passed.

"Hard weather for the poor," he said, slapping his chilled hands together, and stamping his feet with a violence that sent the mud oozing through the rents in his tattered shoes.

"Thru for you," said Nancy, in her soft Irish brogue; "but if we've a roof over us we can't complain. It's poor shelter the streets'd give us on a night like this."

The man laughed shortly.

"You're one of the easy-satisfied sort, Nancy," he said, with a tinge of satire in his voice; "but we can't all be like you. There's some of us would stop at nothing to get out of this cursed poverty. Why, here am I—I'd sell my soul to buy a few years of decent life. Oh, you needn't look at me. I'm no worse than yourself; only made different, that's all. Well, I must move on now. Good night."

Nancy mechanically echoed his salutation, then watched him as he went slowly down the street, swerving at one moment to avoid the swollen body of a dead dog lying directly in

his path, and an instant later, catching one wheel of his barrow in a pile of refuse on the top of which she could discern a couple of old down-at-heel shoes, a battered tin kettle, and a child's straw hat. The old woman turned her eyes away instinctively from the squalid sight.

"A curse on all towns," she muttered between her blue, trembling lips. "It's only the rich has any life in them at all; for the poor it's hell—just hell all the year round. No wonder they go astray—God help them!"

Tears came into her eyes as her glance wandered up and down the cheerless street.

"God help them!" she repeated for the hundredth time that day, and pity deepened in her soul for the city-born poor who had no memories like hers to cheer them through the dark, evil days: memories of breezy upland slopes and moist, green valleys dotted with sheep and cattle, and dark with springing corn. Ah! The blessed country where you could see the sky above your head, and the air was clear and sweet, and there was the singing of the birds!

The old woman closed her eyes in a sort of ecstasy of longing for the life that could never again be hers. She still preserved the vivid imagination of the Irish peasant through all the misery of the new, strangely-conditioned life; but she was grown too old for the fairy

castle-building in which youthful minds seek refuge from their sorrows. To find escape from the present there was but one road by which her soul might travel, and that led backward to the past. Thus it was a vision of what had been that rose before her now as her wrinkled eyelids made a screen between her and the dreary London street.

She saw a whitewashed cabin with larch trees growing in double rows at the back, and winding by it a noisy brook that widened to a foaming torrent when it reached the old grey mill at the further bend of the road. She saw, too, the kindly face of the husband who had died before his prime, and the sons who had sprung up about her, lusty at first as the young larch trees in the coppice, then fading one by one till only the little girl was left to gather up all her love. Little Norah ! A smile curved her sad lips, for the closed eyes were beholding now a lovely childish face set in a ripple of amber curls ; the face of one of God's angels rather than that of a mere human child. Ah, if only she had died in her youth, if the coffin-lid had closed on that innocent baby face !

But the vision of gracious childhood passed. A tall maiden stood in the smiling cherub's place, and the old woman's features contracted with pain ; the memory of that time was bitter even yet after all those wretched years.

Norah had more than fulfilled the promise of her childhood. At eighteen she was the acknowledged belle of the neighbourhood, and the pride and torment of her mother's heart. Beautiful and high-spirited, with just sufficient education to make her dissatisfied with her lot, it was perhaps inevitable that she should go the usual way of the peasant who wearies of the fields. The return of an old school-fellow from service in London crystallised her vague longings into a definite resolve. Why should not she, too, wear silk and velvet and furs and feathers like Rose M'Bride? While others might try their fortunes in a richer country, was she always to remain in contented poverty at home? In vain the wise old mother reasoned with her; Norah's repinings and reproaches filled the cabin from morning until night. Weary of the struggle, Nancy's resistance broke down at length, and then came the last scene of all—the quay of a seaport town, a boat moving slowly out of the harbour, the flash of a white handkerchief, and the outline of a slender, girlish figure fading slowly into the growing gloom beyond the bar.

Norah left many an aching heart behind her, for she had more suitors than any girl in the village. For months after her departure there would be quite a stir among these foolish young people whenever the postman was seen to

knock at Nancy's Nugent door. And Nancy had scarcely broken the seal of her letter before she was besieged with anxious inquiries that were easily answered at first, but became difficult to parry later on, when fear rose out of the written pages and knocked persistently at the mother's heart. When a couple of years had gone by no more questions were asked, for everybody knew that Nancy's last letters had been returned to her from the Dead Letter Office, and that no trace of Norah's whereabouts could be found. Then, one by one, her admirers consoled themselves elsewhere, until only Leonard Driscoll remained faithful to the memory of the missing girl. When Nancy, growing desperate with anxiety, resolved to go to London in search of her daughter, he refused to be left behind. Two heads are better than one, he said, an argument which at once decided the point in his favour. So together these two sought her in places likely and unlikely, beating the coverts of the great city till the weeks became months and the months lengthened into years. And now, as the chance of finding her grew ever more remote, Leonard began to tire of the fruitless quest. At length he gave it up as hopeless, and, urged chiefly by the desire to obtain forgetfulness, he married a shrewd Lancashire lassie—the very antithesis of his early love. But events proved that he had

made a wise choice ; his affairs prospered ; in time he would be a rich man.

Contrary to his fears, Nancy showed no sign of anger at his defection. Men will be men, she thought ; and, after all, he had waited long enough to satisfy even her. So they remained friends in spite of the new ties, though she avoided him as much as possible, for they could no longer meet without a feeling of embarrassment on both sides. Each knew what the other was thinking of, what common memory their meeting instantly evoked. And the knowledge made speech of the ordinary kind difficult and unnatural to these two whose talk had circled for years round the one engrossing theme. Nancy sometimes wished, and she found herself wishing it now, that something might take Leonard out of London, so that she might never see his face again.

“Nancy ! Nancy Nugent ! What, in God’s name, are you doing here at this time of night ? Do you know what hour it is at all ? ”

Nancy looked up with a start of surprise at the owner of the loud, cheery voice ; then her brows met in an unusual frown.

“Oh, it’s you, Leonard Driscoll ! ” she said in a tone that betrayed annoyance. For some reason his appearance at this moment was particularly irritating. Perhaps the handsome, prosperous figure emphasised too strongly the

distance separating the present from the past. "I was only waitin' for the childer to be comin' home from school," she added. "It's about their time now."

"The children!" repeated Leonard, with an amused laugh. "Why, woman alive! they went by hours ago. You must have been asleep."

Asleep! Nancy sat up and looked about her confusedly. The street lamps were shedding a watery light on the wet pavements and on the glistening iron railings of the opposite houses. The sleet had ceased to fall. Leonard was right. She must have slept, and no wonder he laughed. It was very foolish of her to have fallen asleep in such a place. But his laughter increased her irritation. It was not her fault if she was old and feeble, she thought; he would be old himself one day, if he lived.

Too much offended to reply, she struggled stiffly to her feet, and, without looking at him again, began gathering up the apples and tossing them into the basket which had fetched them hither that morning. But her fingers were so benumbed with cold that some of the apples, eluding their grasp, rolled away into the darkness at her feet. She stooped to grope about for them, conscious all the time that Leonard's eyes were upon her, and feeling that he doubtless was thinking her a very

useless old woman. Leonard watched her for a moment with an anxious expression in his pleasant, open countenance, then caught up the little light figure in his arms, and deposited it on the stool against the wall.

"Now, you're not to stir till I tell you," he said kindly. "You must let me help you to-night."

Nancy made no resistance. She sank back wearily on her seat, watching him with a certain amount of satisfaction as he swept the apples into the basket with swift, decided movements that soon cleared the stall. Then he slung the full basket across his shoulder and turned to her with a smile.

"Give me the stool and come along. I'm going to see you home, Nancy."

They were half-way down the street before the old woman spoke.

"It's the fine masterful way you have with you," she said; and there was a note of grudging admiration in her voice. "You'd have been the right husband for her. Her spirit was too high."

"Oh, perhaps," returned the man in a tone of some embarrassment; "but all that is a long way behind us now. It's never any good to go back over the past."

Nancy sighed.

"Not to youngsters like you. But could people have nothing in front of them, so their

mind must go back or go nowhere at all. But she was a fine girl; you'll allow that much, Leonard?"

"Aye, will I!" The man's accents were deep and solemn as her own. "There was witchcraft in every look of her, in every word that fell from her lips, in every hair of her golden head."

He paused, and echoed Nancy's sigh. The old woman slipped a wrinkled hand through his arm. She was not alone in her memories after all.

"Come round and have a bit of supper with us," Leonard said persuasively, as they were ascending the crazy staircase that led up past four floors to her wretched room under the roof. "Bessie and the children are always glad to see you."

"Bessie and the childer," repeated the old woman, regarding him with an air of puzzled questioning; then a light broke across her countenance, and she added apologetically, "Of course, the childer. Sure, I oughtn't to forget them; I've always looked on them as my own."

When he had gone, she sat down before the little table, and, leaning her elbows on it, dropped her face into her shaking hands. She wondered why her head felt so queer, why all the time she was talking to Leonard everything in the room seemed turning round them

until her brain swam, and it was only by a strong effort she could manage to keep her feet. She hoped she was not going to be ill, for illness would mean the infirmary for perhaps a long time, and the abandonment of her search for Norah. The bare thought of such a misfortune was terrifying, but she thrust it from her instantly. No, no, she wasn't going to be ill; she was just a bit weak; and little wonder, for she had eaten nothing since morning. If she had a cup of tea now—she raised her head and looked round at the fireless grate and the empty kettle standing on the cold hob. It was a dispiriting sight, and she had not energy enough to light the fire and set the water on to boil. Besides—she suddenly remembered—wouldn't Leonard expect her? He had turned back to tell her so as he was leaving the room.

As a rule she shrank from accepting Bessie's hospitality. The spectacle of that prosperous household reminded her too painfully of what might have been had her daughter possessed but a tithe of the Lancashire girl's sturdy common-sense. Too much beauty and too little ballast, she would mutter to herself, thinking of Norah, but that did not prevent a feeling of jealous bitterness from creeping into her heart. Leonard's recent kindness, however, had softened her towards him. It was as though the old bond between them had been

tacitly renewed. After all, she had for years regarded him as a son, and his children loved her—in a superficial, childish way, perhaps, but love of any sort is precious to the old. To-night more than ever Nancy felt this for truth, and in her aching need of sympathy and kindness was almost ready to forgive Bessie her good qualities—a stretch of charity to which at ordinary times she seldom attained.

“I will go,” she decided at last, and rising, she threw her cloak about her shoulders again, pulling the hood well up over her head.

Her pride so far vanquished, she felt she might now let her thoughts dwell with satisfaction on the cosy meal that awaited her.

“Bessie makes good tea ; I will say that for her,” the old woman admitted half-shamefacedly, as she stumbled down the narrow, ill-lit staircase and gained the dark, wind-swept street.

It was very cold, and sleet was falling heavily again. Luckily there was only a street or two to be traversed, and a few minutes’ brisk walking brought her to Driscoll’s house. She was panting with the haste she had made by the time she reached it, and glad to pause for a moment before attempting to climb the half-dozen steps that led up to the front door.

The blind had not yet been drawn on the

parlour window, and from where she stood Nancy had a clear view of the lighted room within. The table was spread for supper with a white damask cloth such as she herself had often proudly hung out to dry on the garden hedge at home. Bessie's active figure was flitting from the table to the fire and back again, like a busy household fairy; two rosy-cheeked children clung to her skirts, toddling back and forth wherever she went. Leonard sat opposite the fire, buried in the depths of a capacious arm-chair, his long limbs outstretched to the blaze. The smile playing on Bessie's homely features was reflected on his handsome countenance, making it look almost boyishly young again. It was as though time had suddenly turned backward, bringing Nancy face to face with the bright-eyed lad who used to come courting her daughter in the long summer evenings of the years that were gone. Watching him her brow grew dark.

So this was how Leonard remembered the past! After all, he was no better than the others who were happy and had forgotten. Out here in the lonely streets some memory of the old love might creep back for a moment to his heart, but only for a moment; Bessie and the children held a charm against it, and it was never suffered to cross the threshold of his home. The thought brought with it a quick rush of resentment; she felt that Leonard's

bread would choke her if she took the place set for her at his board.

"I'll die of hunger first," she said to herself, with angry resolution, turning away from the door, all the old bitterness gathering in her heart.

She walked on aimlessly for a long time, heedless of the driving sleet or the cutting wind that lashed it against her face, sitting down now and then to rest for a moment on a doorstep, then dragging herself up and wandering on again. By and by, as the hour grew later, the streets took on a more melancholy aspect. There were few people abroad now, and these slouched hastily by in the darkness, most of them on their way to seek shelter of some sort for the night. They were the city's outcasts who had nowhere to lay their heads. Nancy thought of Norah and shuddered.

But the thought acted as a stimulant. She roused herself from her brooding with an angry jerk. What a fool she was to let herself be vexed at the sight of Leonard's happiness ! What did it matter whether he remembered or forgot the past ? She at least was left, and, thank God, she still had strength to carry on the search for her child. Insensibly her step quickened. She began to look anxiously about her, and her tired eyes became suddenly watchful and bright.

Some of the doorsteps she passed, especially

those protected by a covered porch, were already occupied ; now and then one of the crouching figures turned at the sound of her advancing tread. The surly-minded among them growled out an angry oath when she accosted them ; some, more indifferent, looked at her in apathetic silence ; others were fast asleep. Over these she bent with beating heart, feverishly seeking to decipher their features in the dim light. One of them, a big, gaunt woman, held a baby clasped to her breast. Her tattered shawl had fallen to one side, torn from her shoulder by the wind, and the half-clad child was whimpering with the cold. Perceiving this, Nancy stooped and picking up the shawl spread it carefully across the sleeping pair ; but light as her movements had been they awoke the woman. She sat up, muttering and rubbing her eyes ; then, recognising Nancy, broke into a hard, mirthless laugh.

“ Ah, Nancy Nugent ! At the old game again ; covering up poor devils the cold might put out of their misery if you’d only let them be. But that’s just what Nancy won’t do,” she went on, addressing nobody in particular, unless it were the unconscious babe in her arms. “ She’ll take the clothes off her own back if she sees another wanting them—that’s old Nancy’s way.”

“ Wot’s all the jawin’ about ? Wot does she come here for, disturbin’ of folk ? ” queried

a man's gruff voice from the next doorstep. "Can't she let folk be? Who's she?"

"She's a sight too respectable to tell you her name," answered the woman saucily. "Well, Nancy, I'm sure I wish you luck," she said in quite another tone. "Maybe you'll find her to-night."

"I will, please God," Nancy murmured, but her voice trembled with weariness, for, brave though her spirit might be, the old woman's bodily forces were almost spent. A little way farther on she collapsed utterly; her aching limbs refused to carry her a moment longer; she sank down helplessly on the nearest doorstep, and began to cry from sheer exhaustion—the weak, slow tears of the aged.

The door against which she sheltered was deep-set in a thick wall skirting the yard of a brewery; she could hear the whir of the restless wheels within, and all the air about her was full of the sour-sweet smell of malted grain. For a few moments she felt warmer and comforted somewhat by these sounds of life at this dead hour of the night. But the wind reached her even here. It blustered and tore about her as she crouched against the door, and the fierce cold gripped her again; each fresh blast seemed to sheathe an icy knife in her heart. After a while she felt herself wondering miserably whether death would come to her

here in the streets as it had come to the poor homeless dog she had seen that afternoon under the wheel of the coster's barrow. Happily, however, a strange numbness by and by began to creep upon her, deadening her sense of suffering, and wrapping all her faculties in a pleasant haze. Though she was still vaguely conscious of the cold, it had ceased to cause her any discomfort ; every moment her drowsiness increased. Presently her head nodded from side to side, as if grown too heavy for the frail neck ; then her eyes closed suddenly, and her chin fell forward on her breast. The wet cloak flapped about her ; the hood of cloth blew back from the grey head ; but Nancy no longer felt the sharp thrust of the wind, or the lash of the sleet against her face. Huddled on the cold stone doorstep she slept as peacefully as an infant in its warm cot—body and mind at rest.

The clocks had struck two before Nancy awoke, starting up shivering and terror-stricken, the cold sweat breaking out on her brow in great tremulous beads.

Good God ! What was that pitiful cry ? It sounded like the wailing of a child.

“Mother ! Mother !”

The words came sighing towards her on the wind : “Mother ! Mother !” Only these two words repeated over and over again, now rising wildly on the swell of the wind, now

dying away in a faint, long-drawn echo, like the falling croon of the banshee.

Nancy raised herself on her elbow to listen. Her breath came in quick, choking sobs ; one hand was clutching wildly at her throat.

“ Mother ! Mother ! ”

There was the cry again, nearer this time, and louder and more insistent. Now, Holy Virgin ! that was surely Norah’s voice. Oh—trust a mother’s ear !—it was Norah herself who called.

In an instant she was on her feet, striving to pull her cloak about her shoulders, but her chilled fingers were powerless against the gusts of wind that swirled through its heavy folds. She was so weak that she could scarcely stand upright, but she took no heed of her weariness now. She no longer felt the cold that transfixed her ; there was only room in her consciousness for one sensation, one all-absorbing thought—Norah was near. The great city she had deemed so pitiless had taken compassion on her at last, and would give her back her child. At the prospect her brain reeled ; after all those years it was almost too much joy.

She stood for a little while to steady herself, then set her face resolutely in the direction whence she believed the voice had come. Walking was easier now, for though the wind blew as roughly as ever, the sleet had ceased to

fall. But Nancy knew she could not go much farther. Leaden weights seemed to press her feet to the ground; her strength would not hold out for long.

"Norah! Norah!" she whispered to herself, repeating the beloved name over and over again, as though it were a talisman to conjure away fatigue. "Norah! Norah!" At times the whisper rose to an audible cry, as she went tottering forward through the darkness, eyes and ears strained to their utmost to catch every sight and sound.

Presently she entered a long, narrow street, with rows of private houses on either side, houses once of comfortable, even pretentious aspect, now fallen for the most part into tenements, and reeking of filth and decay. On one side of the street they parted to make space for a narrow paved passage or court, entered by a covered archway, and leading to a row of tumble-down stables, in the window of one of which a feeble light burned. A cabman putting up his horse, Nancy thought, pausing under the gas-lamp that lit the entrance to the court. She could see him now bustling to and fro in the dim rays of the lantern, and his voice came to her ears as he talked to the tired beast. It was a particularly kind, hearty voice, and it cheered the old woman with a pleasant sense of companionship. She leaned against the lamp-post to listen, feeling strangely

loth to move on again through the dark and solitary street.

As she stood thus, her eyes, obeying the instinct of habit, were wandering on every side, striving to pierce the gloom. Suddenly she drew herself erect, and an exclamation broke from her lips; for there, almost within reach of her touch, was the shadowy outline of a woman's form crouched on the ground against the inner wall of the arch. Nancy's heart leaped with the old throb of expectancy; she hobbled forward, and laying her hand on the woman's shoulder gave it a gentle shake.

"Don't stay here, acushla, unless it's your death you're lookin' for," she said. "Sure, you couldn't have found a worse place in all London to-night. The draught is fit to cut you in two. Get up now, like a good cratur, and I'll find you a betther shelther if you'll come with me."

She spoke in a tone of persuasive kindness, but the woman gave no sign of having heard. Nancy contemplated her doubtfully for a moment, then, putting a hand gently under her chin, turned the hidden face up to the light. And then a choking cry burst from her. She fell on her knees beside the motionless figure, and flung her arms about it in a frenzy of delight.

"My child! My child!"

"Wake up, Norah, acushla! It's cold, cold

you are, and soaked through to the skin—you that used to be happed so snug and warm. Oh, do ye hear yer poor old mother? For God's sake wake up and spake to me! Norah! Norah!"

Her voice, cracked and husky, hardly rose above a whisper; every word was strangled in a rising sob. She strove to wring the wet out of the woman's drenched garments; she dragged the cloak off her own shoulders, and wrapped it about the stirless form. And she laid her wrinkled cheek against the sleeping face, and pressed her mouth to the cold damp lips, seeking to warm them with her feeble breath. But the sleeper still slept on. Then a terrible fear flashed into Nancy's mind; she began to tremble from head to foot. In vain she strove to thrust the fear from her; it returned and gripped her by the heart. All the sorrows of her life looked suddenly trivial in the anguish of this hour. She flung her arms aloft in a despairing appeal to heaven, but the sullen streak of sky visible above the chimney-pots, seemed to frown upon her woe. She cast her eyes wildly about her, but the silence of the night was unbroken save for the restless footfall on the paving-stones beyond. It denoted a human presence, however, and remembering the cabman, she lifted up her voice and called.

At that moment, his task completed, the

man was leaving the stable when a cry rose in front of him—a wild, hardly human cry that woke an answering echo among the ruined buildings at the rear of the court.

Startled—for it was an eerie sound at such an hour—he ran quickly forward, the light bobbing and swaying in his hand.

“Is there anything wrong?” he asked anxiously, pausing beside Nancy under the arch.

She lifted up a face he never forgot, and pointed with a shaking forefinger to the woman in her arms.

“Dead!” she said in a hoarse whisper. “She was my last, an’ now she’s dead too.”

“Dead!” He echoed the word in a tone of awed surprise, then stood silent for a few moments, considering, as some inkling of the nature of the tragedy began to dawn upon his mind. He looked at Nancy irresolutely, appeared about to speak, looked again, and finally shook his head. The man was both cold and hungry. He had been out the greater part of the previous day as well as more than half the night, and he was as tired at this moment as his own horse; but he was by nature kind-hearted, and he had a grown-up daughter at home.

“Keep up your courage,” he said cheerfully, the brief hesitation passed. “Maybe it’s not

so bad as you think. I'll just run and fetch a policeman, and we'll see what can be done between us."

He set his lantern on the ground beside her, and in another instant disappeared into the street.

But a policeman was hard to find at that time of night; it was a full half-hour before he returned with a constable—a surly fellow, grumbling audibly at being taken so far off his usual beat.

"Well, my good woman," he was pompously beginning, but the sentence remained unfinished. He glanced at his companion, and, by a simultaneous movement, both men hastily drew back.

Nancy was still sitting as the cabman had left her under the arch, holding the senseless woman in her arms, but now she was rocking the limp form to and fro as one might rock a restless babe, and crooning out an old cradle-song in her shrill, cracked treble. The policeman picked up the lantern, and turned its light full on the fixed white face that stared up at them from Nancy's shoulder out of a mass of disordered grey hair.

There was a moment's breathless silence, then the hand holding the lantern dropped to his side. "Dead as a door nail," he said emphatically to his companion. "It's a case for the coroner, not for you or me."

At the sound of his voice the old woman broke off her song abruptly, and putting up an admonishing finger, shook it at the speaker.

"Whisht with your talk!" she commanded sharply. "Ye'll wake the child, and she not well too. There! There! Sleep, alannah! Sleep!"

And again she fell to rocking and soothing the dead woman, murmuring tender mother-words into the ears that could not hear.

The two men looked on helplessly, unable to utter a word. After a short interval the old woman glanced up at them and smiled.

"The others were aisy to manage, but this one always was a rogue—a little rogue of the world. The neighbours tell me I spoil her, and maybe they're not far wrong. But who can say a cross word to her? Did yez ever see such a beauty? Look at them for curls!"

She smoothed out a tress of the tangled grey hair by drawing it tenderly through her fingers, and held it up to the light.

"If I'd all the gold that's in that hair I'd be a rich woman," she said, with a low, crackling laugh that held a note of triumph.

To the two onlookers there was something terrible in her laughter; it could hardly have startled them more had it issued from the lips of a corpse.

"Good Lord! this is awful!" said the soft-hearted cabman, turning to his companion

with a gesture almost of appeal. The latter rose at once to the level of the other's confidence in him ; his ample form stiffened visibly with a sense of professional importance, and a note of judicial solemnity crept into his voice when he spoke.

"Is she her daughter?" he asked in the tone of one who was not to be trifled with in the discharge of his duty.

The cabman shook his head.

"God knows! But it's all the same," he answered, with a shudder.

"Well, you just leave her to me," whispered the constable, with a reassuring nod, and then addressing Nancy:

"My good woman," he began again, this time in a kinder tone; "I'm sorry if she is any relation of yours, but the poor thing—the fact is"—he hesitated, then ended with desperate brevity, "Why, she's stone-dead."

The old woman raised her eyes shrinkingly to the speaker's face. The gleeful light was slowly dying out of them as her wandering faculties struggled to grasp the meaning of his words.

"Dead!" she repeated in a dull, puzzled tone. "Who says my baby is dead?"

"Baby, indeed! Nonsense, woman!" exclaimed the policeman irritably, losing patience in the unpleasantness of his task.

"Baby! Why, can't you see she's——"

But the cabman caught him by the arm. A moment more and he would have clapped his hand on the constable's august mouth.

"For God's sake, have some pity in you!" he said. "Leave her that one grain of comfort—leave her her little child."

As a Man is Able

THE village of Aughaveeragh, with its outlying farmhouses and little thatch-roofed cabins, curls itself into a fold of the overhanging mountain range. In front the blue and grey sea shimmers against the horizon half a mile away; behind, the great brown flanks of the mountains rear a rampart between it and the world beyond. It is a dreary place enough, lying *perdu* in the solitude of the lonely, watchful hills, poor at times to the point of desperation, always straitened and pinched and careless, neglected alike by tourist and traveller, and largely dependent for outside news on the columns of the weekly paper and the gossip of the blacksmith's forge.

The forge stands by the wayside, just above the bend where the road makes a sudden dip and drops almost perpendicularly into the ragged village street. Tony Meegan plied a brisk trade. All day long the big hammer clinked against the anvil, the mighty bellows flapped their wings and roared like the hoarse voice of the storm. People came and went

unceasingly. There was always a pleasant hum of converse, a sound of laughter, a noisy shuffling and stamping of tethered horses fretting towards the freedom of the open door.

In the chill, early-falling nights the red mouth of the forge flung a cheerful glow across the darkness of the winter road, tempting late-faring folk to turn in awhile from the shivering gloom for a little neighbourly gossip and "an air" of the great forge fire. To them would sometimes enter the blacksmith's beautiful olive-featured daughter, with her bit of sewing or knitting, which she would take to the corner beside the anvil, under the swinging oil lamp, for the dwelling-house hard by was a lonely place at night-time for a solitary, motherless girl. She took, as a rule, small part in the conversation, and seldom stayed long; but while she was there men talked as they had not done before, talked invariably as she wished them to talk, subtly and quite unconsciously led by the lure of her strange, compelling charm.

On a morning in mid-July the blacksmith stood up from the breakfast-table, brushing the crumbs from his mouth with a huge, slow hand, and eyeing his daughter irresolutely. He was just setting forth to the great annual Horse Fair at Tullyallen, and, as was customary on such an important occasion, wore his brave

Sunday attire: two circumstances that combined to give him a good conceit of himself and induce an unusual fit of courage.

"Mat Doolan is a warm man, Ally," he began, in the tone of loud assurance often assumed to mask the nervousness of the speaker. "A very warm man, I tell ye. Where would you find a warmer anywhere?"

"I'm not disputin' your word, father," coldly answered the girl, with a sudden tightening of her proudly-curved lips.

Ally Meegan had many suitors, as all the world knew, but of the goodly number Mat Doolan—a weazened little old bachelor of fifty or thereabouts—was the one who had sighed oftenest and longest for her hand. Doolan was what was termed "a good match." He owned the best bit of land in the valley, and he had built himself a house upon it which was the admiration of the whole country-side. It had a slated roof and four windows on the front, two on either side of a green-painted hall door. And Ally Meegan had but to say the word, and the big new house would be hers, and the sleek fat cattle, and the fine plump fowls—all, in short, that contributed to make Mat Doolan the richest, the only rich, man in the townland of Aughaveeragh.

"You might do worse than marry Mat Doolan," went on the blacksmith, stooping to fumble with the knot of his boot-lace, thereby

avoiding his daughter's eyes. "You'd have everything any woman could wish for, an' you an' me between us would kape the whip hand of Misther Mat for the remainder of his days."

He gave the knot a fierce pull on the last words, then drew himself slowly erect, still without looking at his daughter.

"Is it afraid of Mat Doolan you would be?" asked Ally with an accent of cold surprise.

"Well, I might not, an' yet again I might," answered the other ambiguously, beginning to back towards the door. Ally watched him with a flicker of amusement in her eyes.

Tony Meegan was beyond dispute the boldest man in a community of daring mountaineers. He was the leader—elected for this essential quality of reckless courage—of a formidable secret society founded in that locality during the dark days of the potato famine; men liked and feared him in equal measure; his word was law throughout the whole rude mountain region where the King's writ seldom ran. Yet Ally knew, and the knowledge was not displeasing, that her father's armour held one weak spot: he who abroad feared neither man nor devil took a timid heart to his own fireside.

This time, however, not a little to his surprise, the girl remained perfectly calm.

“ You usedn’t to be afraid of Mat, father,” was her almost indifferent comment.

“ Thrue for you, Ally. But there’s a thrifle of quare business to be done now, and it’s no time at all for a cunnin’ fellow like that to come thryin’ to push his nose into the Society.”

“ What sort of business ? ”

In a moment her listless manner had vanished. There was a quick catch of excitement in her voice, and she turned eagerly towards her father.

“ Ah, then, it would do you no good at all to know—no good at all, at all,” said the blacksmith soothingly. “ Such things is best kept from women-folk.”

He opened the door as he spoke with the intention of escaping further questioning, but, with a bound, Ally was beside him and had twined her strong fingers about his arm.

“ Oh, father, don’t ever let that man join the Society,” she pleaded, looking at him with wild eyes of entreaty. “ Sure, aren’t you the Captain ? Can’t you make the boys do your biddin’ ? ”

The blacksmith shook his head with a half-whimsical, half-sheepish smile.

“ ’Tisn’t the boys, Ally. ’Tis that Mat knows a dale too much for our safety. That’s where he has me caught.”

Ally was silent for a moment, reflecting,

with her brow puckered into anxious lines. Then she said decidedly:

“Marryin’ him wouldn’t change things, father. Do you think he’d care a thraneen about my biddin’ once the knot was tied? Sure, ’tis tamin’ me he’d like to be doin’—with a whip, like as if I was one of his own dumb bastes.”

She laughed bitterly, and a look of intense hate darkened her countenance. “Why only for thinkin’ of such a thing I could murder him with these two hands. ’Tis well he knows Con McGuire has my promise since last Lady Day.”

“Con McGuire!” exclaimed her companion incredulously. At his tone a bright colour suddenly dyed the girl’s olive skin; her big, fierce eyes became moist.

“’Tis Con McGuire, for sure,” she answered softly, her eyelids drooping till the long lashes lay against the brown oval of her cheeks.

“Con McGuire!” repeated her father. “Well, that caps everything! Sure, ’tis afther Stacy O’Neill he’ll be, you foolish girsha. An’ a better match for Con couldn’t be found: quiet an’ take-it-aisy, like himself. I’ve seen them colloquin’ many’s the time at the bottom of her own boreen, an’ I said to myself, ’tis the great fine match that’ll be entirely. But what’s the matther, girsha?” he broke off to inquire in some anxiety, for Ally’s lips were

trembling, and all the colour had left her face.

Perceiving his blunder too late, the blacksmith stood for a few moments scratching his head in sheepish perplexity, then, as no means of repairing it presented themselves, took refuge in instant flight.

"Lord! Lord! To think of its bein' Con now," he ruminated as he went along the road. "Sure, there's nothing at all to come up to the conthairiness of the women, young an' old. Troth! Con's no more a fit match for her than ugly Black Doolan himself. 'Tis far more continted the poor boy'd be with a quiet little girsha like Stacy than a grand storm of a woman like poor Ally. But sure, if Ally was set on him she'd have to get her own way."

And this is precisely what had happened. Con McGuire had begun by being sorely afraid of the blacksmith's beautiful daughter. Whenever the black eyes looked his way, a nervous tremor would creep along his spine, and he would be hot and cold by turns, and altogether miserable till out of their shining range. At these times he had a feeling of positive physical relief in the company of Stacy O'Neill, whose mild blue eyes might look at you for the length of a day without once making you feel any of these uncomfortable sensations, and who thought and talked

as you did yourself, on common, homely subjects a man could easily understand. But when the black eyes began to linger on him kindly, with a curious softness in their glance that penetrated him like sunshine, Con found himself yielding more and more to their spell. It was certainly flattering to find himself chosen by the handsomest as well as proudest girl in the parish, and Con had all the vanity of a weak man. He was Ally's acknowledged lover and a member of the organisation somewhat ambiguously spoken of as the "Society," before he could satisfactorily explain to himself the strange sequence of events.

After her father had gone, Ally moved about her household duties mechanically. There was trouble in her eyes and a gnawing sense of uneasiness at her heart. And while she worked, her thoughts kept pace with her busy fingers, turning and turning again about the one tormenting theme. What could be the "quare business" her father had hinted at? And why did Mat Doolan choose this very time to thrust himself into the Society?

Ally tossed these questions feverishly to and fro in her puzzled mind, resolved to find an answer to them before the day was done. Meanwhile the flagging hours went by; evening fell and sunset fires were kindled in the west above the sea. On a sudden the window of Ally's kitchen grew pink as the cheek of a

bride behind its muslin veil, then glowed upon her with angry warmth, as the fierce light, deepening seaward, set a scarlet torch in every latticed pane. Ally measured time by the rose-red shadow that streaked the opposite wall. When the shadow reached the row of tins beside the dresser, it marked the milking hour. She took up her pail and went forth.

Passing from the yard into the road, Ally was met by the full dazzle of the sunset. Half blinded, she stood for a moment blinking like a sleepy night-bird in the dawn, then lifting up her eyes again, saw the figure of a girl coming towards her down the hill: a slender young figure, with pale, fluffy hair surrounding a pink, childish face. The girl's glance was downcast, and she drooped a little as she walked. Not until quite close to the spot where Ally stood, straight and strong and glowing in her rich triumphant beauty, did the half-closed eyelids open for one swift, reluctant glance. They fell immediately, veiling a look of helpless hatred, and the girl passed on with hastened steps, turning down the sharp incline that led headlong into the village.

Ally gazed after the slight, hurrying figure with a strange expression of fear and pain growing in her eyes.

How pretty the girl was with her fair hair and the pink roundness of her cheeks! 'Twas

like a little white kitten she was, for all she went so sedately along the road. No man could be blamed for loving her, surely, and Con had thought he loved her not so very long ago. Maybe he had still a *gra* for the fair little crathure—who can see to the inside of a man's heart? And he would have been so safe and happy with Stacy, while now—

The meadow where the cows were lay alongside Mat Doolan's turnip field. She knew he was likely to be there now, weeding after the rain of the day before. She knew, too, that the flash of her jaunty red kerchief could be seen a long way off, and that it would draw Mat as a magnet draws steel. And so it turned out. She had only just finished milking the first cow when he could be seen hurrying across the turnip field; before she could rise from her knees he had leaped through a gap in the hedge and was standing at her side. His small sun-baked face, seamed and furrowed with lines, like one of his own ploughed fields in spring-time, looked eagerly into hers.

"Is there no change in yer mind since last week?" he asked; and there was a tone of menace in his cracked voice.

"What reason would there be for a change?" said Ally proudly, rising and facing him with undaunted eyes.

"Och, what indeed? No raison on earth,

Ally Meegan. An' now did ye hear I was intendin' to come into the Society to help the boys? That ought to be the height of good news to you, so set as ye were on makin' new recruits. Sure, the Recruitin' Sergeant himself couldn't bate ye!"

The girl laughed with exasperating coolness.

"Ah, then, it's as tame as an old clockin' hen the Society must be gettin', or you wouldn't be after riskin' your precious neck for the good of your neighbours. You're too great a coward for that, Mat Doolan."

Her words stung him, as she intended they should. He uttered an inarticulate cry of rage, and the blood rushed darkly into his shrivelled cheeks.

"Och, then, it's the bad tongue ye have, Ally Meegan—the mighty bad scourge of a tongue," he began in a choking voice. "Let me tell ye, you ill-minded crathure, that it's the wild, wicked work entirely the Society has on hands this blessed hour. It's afther the agent they are, like a pack of hounds in full cry. They say it's one life against many, and they're all prepared to take the risk. Now where's your tame clockin' hen?"

His tone was so full of bitter injury that Ally with difficulty restrained a burst of laughter.

"To be sure, they'll talk big enough," she said contemptuously; "an' right well ye

know there'll never be nothing more than words."

"But it's deeds, I tell ye, an' bloody ones we'll be havin' before long," cried Doolan triumphantly; "for it's fairly snowin' down writs an' notices to quit it is since ever the new agent came on the estate. He's a man, the boys say, without the feelin's of mercy in him. They say it's near a hundred little childher he'll have out on the could hillside if the evictions have their way. But they've sworn a bitther oath to prevent him. He's to be *met* comin' home from Petty Sessions at the big bush by Tubberinvar Cross. The lots will be drawn at the next full meetin' of the Society, an' whoever the lot falls on will be the one to do the work. *Thiggin thu?*"

"The lot may fall on you, an' the divil may get his own," said Ally, her pale cheeks belying the tone of forced carelessness.

An evil smile curled Mat's thin, bloodless lips.

"Or on Con McGuire. But sure, I'll sit close beside him, Ally, to kape up his courage an' look afther him in general, unless—unless I'm somewhere else with yerself, acushla."

He spoke quietly enough, but there was a note of significance in his words that chilled the girl like an icy blast. She was silent for a moment, then all the old courage flamed into her face.

“ You mane little spalpeen ! ” she exclaimed indignantly, looking down with scathing contempt on his shrunken figure, twisted and gnarled like an ancient crab tree. “ ’Tis a little ganconah out of the ditch yondher I’d take for my husband before a creeping reptile like you. See here ! ” Before he could escape, she had twisted a hand in the woollen kerchief about his throat, and lifted him clean off the ground. A moment she swung him backwards and forwards, then giving him a last vicious shake, set him on his feet with a scornful laugh.

“ Ally Meegan’s husband—God save the mark ! ” She pointed at him with a derisive finger, and then fell to laughing again till the tears ran down her cheeks.

Mat never uttered a word. He turned on his heel and moved slowly towards the gap. There he turned round and gave her a side-look of such malevolence that the fire in her eyes went out suddenly, and the laughter died upon her mouth.

When the blacksmith had finished his supper that night, Ally went over to where he sat smoking his pipe contentedly in the wide chimney-corner. He started at Ally’s approach. He was very tired after the day’s exertion, and the gleam in her eyes was disquieting. There’s no pace at all to be had in this world, was his thought.

"Father, I want to be a member of the Society," said Ally abruptly. "You must propose me to-morrow night."

The blacksmith stared at her aghast.

"Is it mad you are, girsha? Or what ails ye at all to be thinkin' of sich a thing? Don't ye know no women-folk is ever allowed to consarn themselves with the doin's of men? 'Twouldn't be seemly," he concluded in a tone from which there was meant to be no appeal.

"Seemly!"

Ally tossed the word from her lips with a gesture of fierce scorn.

"Father, I *mane* to be a member. If you won't propose me, Con McGuire must do it. An' sure, ye know well there'll not be one at the meetin' to say no to Ally Meegan. It's a way I have with me just. I can, when I have a mind to, put my comether in less than two two's on the crankiest man that ever walked the world."

There was, as she spoke, the brightness of conscious triumph on her features. Ally measured well her own power.

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On an evening a week later, the forge was all in darkness save for a single glimmer of light. It was not yet eight o'clock, but the fire was only a handful of dying embers. The bellows

were silent, and the great door was closed. The space between the anvil and the door was occupied by the kitchen table, which Ally had lent for the occasion. At one end of it a small paraffin lamp was burning dimly. In its feeble light objects were but vaguely outlined, and the dark corners seemed filled with sinister shapes. Overhead the unceiled roof loomed like a black hood, and black cobwebs lay like dusty banners against the rough, unplastered walls. Now and then there was a rustling of plumes far up in the darkness, where some fowls made their nightly perch. The atmosphere was close and evil-smelling ; but whenever the door opened it admitted a draught of pure air. Sometimes the door was banged with violence, and then the feeble lamp-flame would be blown against the glass, and a procession of weird shadows, emerging from the darkness, flickered across the opposite wall.

At a quarter to eight the forge was half full of men. As eight o'clock struck the President, or Captain, as he was called, took the head of the table, and Ally quietly slipped into the vacant place on his right. Con was on her other side. At that moment the door opened and a little crooked figure stepped across the threshold.

"Bolt the door!" shouted the Captain. "There's eight o'clock struck. No more admittance after this."

Mat Doolan smiled sardonically as, followed by many searching, suspicious glances, he walked coolly up to the top of the table. There was about a foot of space between Con McGuire and his neighbour, and into this he squeezed himself without a word.

"There's no room there." Ally's clear voice rang out sharply through the momentary hush, and her eyes flashed a defiant challenge at the late-comer.

"Och, then, there's a woman in the Society," said Doolan mockingly. "It's highly honoured we are this night, boys, by the presence of the fair sex."

"Aye, there's a woman here," answered the clear voice; "an' she's the best man among ye all."

At this there was a general laugh which served to lighten the overcharged atmosphere, and, relieved, they settled down to the business before them.

"Is the young lady aware of the matther we have on hand this night?" asked Mat, with his most sardonic grin.

"It's a swingin' matther," said the girl, looking at him steadily; "but if there's a rope danglin' over our heads, we have bullets for informers an' traitors."

There was a meaning inflection in her voice which made her hearers start involuntarily and exchange uneasy glances.

“Some of us was against allowin’ a woman to join, but she *is* the best man of us all,” whispered Doolan’s neighbour across him to Con, who assented with a nod and sheepish smile. Poor Con was not finding his rôle of lover to a heroine half so agreeable as he had pictured it some time ago. It was a distinct shock to him to see Ally sitting there, without sign of fear or embarrassment, among all these wild and daring men. And on such business! Con shivered, and unconsciously his thought went out regretfully to the little two-roomed cabin on the hillside, where at this very moment Stacy O’Neill and her widowed mother would be tranquilly spinning in the lamplight. No talk of bloodshed and murder there, but all peace and quiet and modest, hard-working women-folk.

“Boys!” The Captain had risen in his place and was imposing silence on the whisperers at either side of the table with a wave of his great hand. “Boys, there’s times when the ould proverb is in the rights of it, and the laste said is the soonest mended,”—this with an involuntary side-glance at Doolan—“An’, sure, anyhow, there isn’t a man of ye but knows what sort of business it is brings us all together to-night: it ’ud be only wastin’ time to go over the ground again. So, if it ’ud be plazin’ to the meetin’, I’d suggest drawin’ the lots at once, without any more talk. The man that

draws the lot with a cross on it, must wait here afther the meetin' for his ordhers. Nobody else need remain behind. Now, Murtagh, where's that cap ? ”

A man from the lower end of the table handed up a cloth cap full of narrow strips of white paper. The Captain examined them for a moment ; then shook them up, and looked at his companions.

“ Who's to pass it ? ” he was beginning, when Doolan jumped up hastily and snatched the cap out of his hands.

“ Me ! ” he cried almost imperiously, in his shrill, cracked voice. “ I'm the wan among yez laste in the Society's saycrets ; 'tis but fittin' I should pass the lots.”

“ No ! ” broke in Ally impetuously. But the others, offended perhaps by her interference and seeing some truth in Doolan's remarks, nodded approvingly, and looked to the Captain for the signal to proceed.

“ Father,” began Ally imploringly, but the Captain shook his head. Even to please his daughter it would not be prudent to go dead against the feeling of the meeting. She recognised this herself, for she made no further opposition. But her face blanched suddenly, and her teeth grated sharply together, as, leaning forward in the breathless hush, she watched the lean, twisted figure creep slowly round the table. To each man the cap was tendered, and

each plunged in his hand and drew forth a folded slip of paper.

Con was watching too, with a great sinking of the heart. The tense silence, the dim light, and the sinister, slow-moving figure, the mystery, the sense of danger—all conspired to turn him sick with fear and remorse.

Why had he suffered himself to be led by a woman's will? What call had he to join their Society? A decent boy like him that had no spite against anybody—landlord or agent, friend or foe! Poor Con McGuire was an honest, well-meaning youth, but in this bitter moment his love for Ally Meegan went out like a suddenly extinguished torch. Had she never crossed his path he would not have been here to-night.

A hasty pluck at his sleeve made him turn towards Ally, and there was sullen anger in his eyes.

"Whin you get your paper open it at once," she whispered. His eyes softened a little in their expression of assent, and she gave a short gasp of relief. Then the cap was offered to Con. Her turn came next, then Doolan's, and the Captain's last.

As Doolan was moving round the table he was suddenly tripped up by an outstretched foot. It was Ally's. In that moment her eyes had fallen on Con's unfolded paper. One look told her the lot was his. Quick as lightning

she flung out her arm, as if to save Doolan from falling, and by the hasty movement swept the lamp clean off the table. It fell with a crash to the floor, and going out suddenly, left the room in total darkness. The Captain struck a match at once, and somebody lit a candle, which sent an uncertain light across the table and its rows of excited faces. But before the Captain's match was ignited, Con's paper had been snatched from him and another thrust into his hand.

"Who has the lot, boys?" asked the Captain in a voice hard with emotion. There was a moment's silence, and then, as the Captain's eyes swept questioningly round the table, Ally Meegan rose quietly in her place, holding out a strip of paper in a perfectly steady hand.

"It's on me the lot has fallen," she said with simple dignity, and without a quaver in her voice. The announcement had, however, an electrical effect on the listening men. For a moment there was dead silence; then a roar of opposition rose from either side of the table.

"Let the lots be dhrawn again," cried a voice above the tumult. "No! no!" screamed Doolan. "'Tis her sweetheart ought to take her place." The shrill, cracked tones rose to the pointed roof and dominated every other sound. Again there was instant silence and a long breath of relief. "'Tis but fair he should,

if he cares a thraneen for the girl," said one, and a chorus of approval echoed the words. Only the Captain remained silent, so that none should say his voice had swayed their verdict.

"Does the girl agree?" asked another, and all eyes sought the proud, unmoved face.

"If he's a man, he'll spake first," muttered a fair-haired youth, who had long and vainly sighed for Ally's favour. But Con McGuire's cheeks were ashen and his lips a faint livid streak. Ally did not even once glance his way. With tall figure well set-up and proudly lifted head, she calmly faced the meeting.

"The girl agrees," she answered steadily, and the chorus of approval rang louder and fuller than before.

"Then name him, Ally," said the Captain gravely. An irrepressible chuckle of triumph came from the crooked figure behind him. Involuntarily Ally turned to her lover. But at the look of horror in his face she started as if shot. For a full aching minute she stood clasping and unclasping her hands irresolutely. Then they fell to her sides inertly, and with a bitter smile curving her lips, she turned sternly to the waiting men.

"An' it's my sweetheart will gladly take my place," she said slowly; "but he's here to answer for himself. His name——" She paused to moisten her dry lips, looking down piteously into Con's white face. But Con sat

sullen and motionless, with hot anger against her in his heart, and hatred and disgust darkening his pleasant blue eyes. She looked away from him abruptly; two spots of red began to burn in her otherwise colourless cheeks. "His name," she continued in a loud, harsh voice, "his name is Mat Doolan."

There was a moment of dumb astonishment, then a simultaneous murmur of disgust and protest burst forth on every hand. The Captain sprang up, uttering a fierce oath, but something in his daughter's expression quelled him instantly, and he sat down again with an angry growl. As for the favoured individual, Mat Doolan, he stood stock still, aghast with surprise at the girl's unlooked-for counter-move, the grin of triumphant malice still distorting his small, rat-like features. Then, becoming suddenly conscious of the dreadful mockery in the burning eyes fastened upon him, a sickly green pallor overspread his countenance, and he shrank back slowly into the deeper shadows by the door.

"Is it shyness, then, is on ye, Mat Doolan, that ye stand there strivin' to hide yer blushes in the dark?" The cold, jeering voice slit the silence like the sharp stroke of a knife. Doolan cowered closer against the wall. "'Tis love is the poor thing, I'm thinkin', when it strikes the ould. Well, well"—indulgently—"I suppose I must meet ye half-way—God

help ye!—an' save yer face forninst these mockin' youngsters, makin' game of a man that is twice their age."

And slipping out of her place, she went round to Doolan's side.

"Will ye take this from me as a marriage-token?" she said, thrusting the fateful slip of paper into his hand. His shaking fingers closed on it mechanically, and, noticing this, the young man sitting near Con broke into a scornful laugh.

"'Tis Misther McKenzie may go an' insure his life now; there's not an Insurance Company in Europe 'ud refuse him," he said, with bitter dissatisfaction. But Con, to whom the remark was directed, avoided the speaker's glance, and feigned not to have heard.

Nobody else heeded the interruption. All eyes were on the two figures standing by the door: Ally, with her shapely profile towards them, looking beyond, not at, the man upon whom her choice had fallen. There was a curious air of expectancy in her attitude, of tension, as though her whole being were strained to listen for some sound that came not. All at once she faced round to Doolan, letting her hand fall lightly on his shoulder.

"We'll be married no later than Thursday next, an' I bid yez all to the weddin', boys," she said gaily, but her voice was pitched a note too high, and she seemed to fling out a challenge

with every word. A challenge unheeded by him it was meant for, unnoticed by the others, for Ally's rough audience was little versed in the subtleties that govern the actions of women. Silence followed her announcement. Wonder and a dimly-felt sense of tragedy closed the mouths of all present. Even the Captain sat in mute perplexity, waiting for the girl to speak again.

Ally was waiting too, waiting with her gaze fixed in a sort of dazed surprise on the sullen figure of the boy who, only an hour back her docile lover, could listen now without sign of dissent or protest while she pledged herself openly to another man. But so it was. Con's face, even to her unwilling eyes, betrayed no stronger feeling than a vast sense of relief. Indeed, at that very moment he was thinking that, come what might hereafter, he would cling to his newly-recovered freedom: Ally had released him, and he would never consent to be bound again.

The colour swept back into Ally's white cheeks as she read the tokens of her defeat, and she turned to Doolan with a sudden fierceness that took him completely off his guard.

"Why don't ye spake, ye poltroon, and say ye take me at my word?" she cried in a voice trembling with passion. "Stay now!" She caught him by the arm as he made a sudden

movement towards the door. "You've had yer revenge, Mat Doolan, but at laste I've struck blow for blow. An' it's interest I'll be payin' ye before long. Oh, yes, it's yer wife I'll be, sure enough. An' it's well ye'll be looked afther from this day out. You're in luck, Mat Doolan: a lovin' wife, with a sharp eye an' a bullet always handy for informers an' traitors—what more could man wish for? Ah, never look so frightened, Mat! Sure, it's the grand times we'll be havin' together: they'll make up for many an hour like this."

There was a strange wildness in her voice and gesture, and the hand she laid on his arm gripped the flesh through the thick frieze sleeve till he could have screamed with pain and fear. Mat had never been a bold man, and at this moment he read murder in Ally's glittering eyes.

"Help, for God's sake! Murther! She's mad, staring mad!" he gasped, wriggling out of her hold and hurling himself on the fast-bolted door.

"Stand still, Mat Doolan!" shouted the Captain, rising. "You may go now, boys," he added, addressing the audience. "I declare the meeting over. Come here, Mat—you and me has business together now."

But Doolan had wrenched the door open and disappeared into the night. Dumb-founded, the men looked at one another, and

then at the Captain for orders. But the Captain's eyes were on his daughter. Ally went up to Con's side ; her face was quite gentle, but very sad.

“Go !” she said, pointing to the door. “An’ never set foot here again. ’Twas never a fittin’ place for the likes of you. Go, an’ be happy with little Stacy !”

The Two Calls

I

THE classes were over for that day, and, gathering up their portfolios, the pupils trooped merrily out of the door. Then a pleasant hush fell upon the studio. This was the quiet hour Signor Mazzoni loved, for now Carmen sang her solos to him, and teaching her was a widely different matter from instructing the tiresome, tittering class. He seldom allowed anybody to be present at these lessons save the one privileged visitor who was there to-night. But the friendship between them was of long standing. It dated back to the time when Sir Hugh McCrae was a penniless cadet, and Signor Mazzoni was at the height of his great prosperity, before the sudden loss of his magnificent voice silenced the greatest tenor of that day.

When the last of the pupils had disappeared, the Signor seated himself at the piano, and struck a few rapid introductory chords. Then Carmen began to sing. The dusky stillness throbbed suddenly with the first rich notes of her wonderful voice, and the hush seemed to

deepen about them as it rose and fell. She sang, they thought, with new power and passion, and with even more of the old piercing sweetness, the wild *abandon* of the nightingale singing its very soul out to the summer night. The Signor's hands strayed mechanically over the keys, for his dark eyes, wide and shining, were fixed in a sort of ecstasy on the singer's rapt face. At that moment the two faces were curiously alike: the man's, bearded and sallow and seamed by time; the girl's, fresh as a hawthorn bud—both lit up by the same intense inward glow.

“Bravo! Bravo!” he cried exultingly, when the song was ended. “Bravo, little nightingale! Bravo!” he repeated once more, beating his hands softly together in the exuberance of his joy. This moment was almost compensation enough for the past. To see her triumph where he had failed—that had always been his hope. But the hope was latterly become an absolute certainty. The voice he listened to entranced was no ordinary human organ, but a wonderful, supernatural thing, sweet and strong and many-cadenced as the wind, with power to sway the souls of men as the wind sways the listening leaves.

“Is she not magnificent?” he said, turning to his visitor; then he added a little sadly, “But I may no longer keep my nightingale all

to myself. The time is near when she must spread her wings and sing for other ears. With such a gift, it is surely her mission to delight the world."

The man addressed passed his fingers irritably through his thin, already silver-sprinkled hair, and his cold, handsome features were darkened by the sudden frown that gathered between his brows. But feeling the Signor's glance questioning his silence, he drew himself together with a start, and nodded what might be interpreted to mean a curt assent.

At that moment Bianca put her head in at the door, and meeting her master's eye, beckoned to him with mysterious movements of her yellow hand. The Signor got up at once, shrugging his shoulders resignedly, for the housekeeper was an old and privileged servant, and none ever dreamed of disputing her will. The door closed on his slim, bent figure, and for the first time these two found themselves alone.

It was an awkward moment for both. Carmen went over to the small piano at the farther end of the room, and began tossing about the loose sheets of music scattered upon it, with fingers that trembled slightly. She wondered vaguely why she felt so troubled and yet so glad, and why her heart beat so fast with a feeling that was neither joy, nor hope, nor fear, but a mixture of all three.

Her companion was almost equally embarrassed. His glance wandered for a moment undecidedly from the fine new Bechstein on the raised platform, where Carmen had just been singing, to the piano by which she now stood. Then he crossed over to the window, turning his back upon her, and staring down absently at the strip of garden below.

"What a fool I am!" he muttered to himself angrily. "At my time of life too! With my experiences! The whole thing is madness. I will go away at once."

With a gesture full of purpose, he faced round again. Yes, of course, the thing was absurd—utterly absurd. No sane man would be guilty of such folly.

At the sound of his brusque movement Carmen looked up, startled. He was advancing towards her slowly, almost unwillingly; she involuntarily retreated a step, and he came close up to her side.

"Carmen," he said in a curious, strained voice. "Carmen!" His hand dropped upon hers, lying lightly on the pile of music beside her, closed tightly over it, crushing her slender fingers into his feverish palm.

"I love you, Carmen! I love you!" he said, still speaking in that hard, reluctant whisper. The words seemed jerked out from him, one by one, by a power beyond his control. "I—I meant to say something quite

different, but I cannot. So let it be—I love you ! ”

The halting utterances might not have satisfied an older, more impartial critic, but they fell on the girl's heart like sparks of living fire, and each one kindled an answering flame.

“ I love you too,” she said, looking up at him gravely, with her candid child's eyes. And then, obeying an instinct of her gracious foreign breeding, she caught his disengaged hand, and carried it to her lips.

After that there was silence between them for several minutes—a silence in which the man was realising the completeness of his conquest, and the naïve child was tasting the essence of all life's joy. When, after the short interval, he spoke again, a subtle change was noticeable in his manner.

“ You have made me very happy, Carmen,” he said ; “ and I shall be happier still if you will consent to make a sacrifice for my sake. Dear, you will give up all this now ? ” He waved his hand comprehensively towards the piano. “ You understand, dearest ? It would not be a fitting career for my wife.”

A smile accompanied the speech, but its tone of calm assurance offended her. It was so obvious that he took her acquiescence entirely for granted, as though, indeed, there could be no two opinions about the matter. A chill of disappointment went through her,

and instinctively she drew a few steps away from him before answering.

“My profession—my art—you cannot seriously ask me to give that up?” she said at last, and the words were uttered through quivering lips. “Oh, don’t you know what that would mean to Uncle Carlo? I think the blow would kill him. You are his friend—you know what he has suffered. He says he only lives now through and for me—can’t you *try* to understand?” There was a note of passionate appeal in her voice, but the man had no ear for it: his cold features did not soften.

Upon this the colour streamed into her cheeks, and an angry light began to flicker through the trouble of her eyes.

“You *shall* understand!” she declared imperiously. “In plain words, I refuse, even for your sake, to be so cruel to my best friend.”

There was no wavering in her attitude this time. She faced him with an air of proud decision, convincing even to his unwilling mind. And how alluring she was in this new mood of revolt. It needed but the added touch of colour in the round, smooth cheeks, the angry sparkle in the soft, dark eyes, to give her girlish loveliness just the note of richness which at ordinary times it lacked. Now she was beautiful, and the fascination of her beauty fired him with the desire to keep her at any cost.

Dropping the curt phraseology of his previous speech, he began to talk volubly—to explain.

She might think his scruples ridiculous, but he simply could not bear to picture her—his wife—standing in the glare of the footlights, a target for every eye. Even if he loved her less, his feeling would be the same; but loving her as he did, he would prefer to lose her altogether than share his rights with the vulgar public, to whom the woman behind the footlights naturally belongs. Did she not herself see that the position would be an intolerable one? For he would not content himself with a divided possession. “All—or nothing” was his motto. She must be his entirely—his own in reality as well as in name. Now would she choose?

Into the firelit stillness his whispers fell, soft and coaxing as the love-notes of a dove. And very tender was his touch when, taking her reluctant hands in his, he drew her towards him. In this gentle mood he was irresistible, and he knew it. There was a last brief struggle, but Carmen was young, and love seemed to her a divine thing, rightly claiming the first place in her life.

“You make hard terms,” she said slowly, with a tinge of irrepressible bitterness. “But I cannot give you up; I cannot live without you. Let it be as you wish.” Then, with a

sob of mingled joy and pain, she yielded to his constraining arms.

When Uncle Carlo heard the news from Carmen herself that night, there came into his countenance a look that she did not understand, a look only two people had ever seen him wear before: Bianca and the great specialist who told him, kindly but with merciful brevity, that his voice was hopelessly doomed.

In the long silence following Carmen's announcement, however, the grey shadow lifted, and when he spoke, it was in his usual mild tone.

"I am sorry the man I received in friendship has so ill repaid my trust. But we need not talk of him. If I had my way, I should never see him again. As for you, carissima, you shall do as you please, for you are no longer a child to be coerced, even for your own good. You are a woman now; you have a right to decide for yourself. And, indeed, for your future I have no real fear. We shall be parted—for a time—and you will suffer, perhaps—nay, I am certain. But the artist must have many experiences: they are essential to his full development. In suffering you will develop too; you will mature—and then you will come back! For you cannot escape your destiny—not with that man. Oh, yes, most surely, you will come back."

"Uncle Carlo!" protested the girl indignantly. "Do you mean that I shall repent?"

"Listen, child! You have consented to a great, a monstrous sacrifice to appease this man's foolish pride, and you have not thought about the cost to yourself. But youth never thinks: it is too eager to go forward. And you, perhaps, hardly yet realise that the artist in you is your true self. To separate the artist from the woman would be to leave you maimed, incomplete. Remember, also, it is as you are now he loves you. *Anima mea*, there is still time to reflect—to retreat."

"Retreat!" The girl threw back her head, meeting his sad eyes with a happy little laugh. "But I do not reflect at all: I just trust him, Uncle Carlo."

The Signor looked at the bright youthful face and sighed.

"Carissima!" he murmured pityingly. "You are a nightingale now, but, remember, to the ignorant a mute nightingale is only an insignificant little brown bird."

II

The days seemed long to Uncle Carlo during the four years that followed. He taught his classes as of old; pupils came and went; light footsteps sounded across the polished floor of the studio; fresh young voices filled it with

their music from morning till night. But when night came, the house grew very silent. Even old Bianca, in the kitchen, felt the heavy stillness wrapping itself about her like a shroud. There was never a sound of speech or movement in the lonely studio above, where she knew the Signor was sitting, as he always sat, with a strange, listening look in his face, and eyes constantly fixed on the door. She herself was gradually growing into his own habit of watchful suspense; she, too, hearkened for a footstep that came not, starting up with beating heart if the door creaked suddenly, or a mouse scampered across the kitchen floor.

When the fourth winter came the Signor's restlessness increased. He would have Carmen's room aired a couple of times a week; her books and music were littered about everywhere, in the old disorderly fashion he had been often heard to deplore. Her little chair once more stood opposite his own on the sheltered side of the hearth, and at night a great fire blazed up the studio chimney. He would have every jet of gas lit too, till all the dim corners glowed, and the room shone as though for a festival; but it will be *festa* when she comes, he thought.

The winter wore away thus, and as it neared its close, the Signor's mood changed again. Doubt took the place of hope in his heart.

"I forgot—idiot that I was!—I forgot,"

he would mutter at times. "Carmen can no longer choose with the old freedom, for she is a mother. That means there are compensations: after all, she has her boy."

And "She has her boy," was the identical phrase with which Sir Hugh McCrae soothed every scruple on his wife's account, when, night after night, he left her with the careless kiss of custom for club, or theatre, or opera—anywhere that promised distraction outside his own home. Lonely? Nonsense! No sensible woman could feel lonely in the company of her child. Sir Hugh had a habit of making platitudinous remarks of this sort, which, when he had repeated them often enough, became rooted beliefs in his narrow, dogmatic mind. Carmen was reasonable, as his wife should be, therefore Carmen was content. So the matter was comfortably settled beyond the admission of doubt.

If he sometimes proposed that she should accompany him, it was merely for the sake of appearances, or because there were special reasons why she should go. Not that he really wanted her with him, for Carmen did not at all fulfil what he considered to be the bounden duty of the woman who bore his name. She was not—never had been—a social success as he understood the words, and the consciousness of her failure rankled at the core of his vanity like a slow-festering wound.

During the first year of their married life there had, it was true, been little fault-finding on his part, but that was while the love-glamour lasted. By and by he began to look for other, more showy, qualities, besides worshipping devotion, in his wife, and these were lamentably absent to his critical, disillusioned eyes. To doubt that she once possessed them would be to doubt his own judgment—an intolerable admission on the part of a McCrae; so he could but ruefully suppose that whatever in Carmen had infatuated him formerly was left behind in that old life she had quitted for his sake. After a while it would have puzzled him to analyse the nature of the charm she once exercised over senses and intellect and will. The bright, gifted creature of Signor Mazzoni's studio began to fade out of memory altogether, and, little by little,—changes of this sort work slowly—Carmen dropped from the pedestal whereon love had set her, to the place of patronising affection we reserve for the “good little things” who, doubtless, contribute to our comfort but do not count for much in our lives.

“A dear little home-bird,” he sometimes facetiously called her, never noticing the dull colour creeping slowly into her cheeks, the storm-signal suddenly lighting up her gloomy eyes.

A home-bird! Ah, what was it Uncle

Carlo had said ? “ Remember, to the ignorant, a mute nightingale is only an insignificant little brown bird ! ”

When the roll of her husband's carriage wheels was lost in the rumble of the surrounding streets, Carmen would pace up and down the big empty drawing-room, feeling the silence, the unutterable loneliness creeping in upon her like a cold invading flood. Then, strive as she would to bridle them, her thoughts turned yearningly towards the past, and she was back again in the cheerful studio, where the long, happy evenings were always spent. She could almost see the firelight dancing along the picture-covered walls, the grand piano on the dais, and the slim figure of her uncle bending over the keys.

“ Sing to me, *anima mea*, ” he would say, and song after song would be sung to his soft accompaniment, neither heeding the lateness of the hour till Bianca rushed into the room, in her stormy way, and turned out the lights before their eyes.

“ That is how naughty children must be treated, ” she would say in her severest tones, and then there would be a chuckle somewhere in the darkness.

“ Bianca means well, but she makes too much fuss, ” Uncle Carlo would content himself with remarking, as they groped their way towards the door.

Dear Uncle Carlo! How ill she had requited his goodness! How lightly she had sacrificed him on the altar of the newer love! And how easily she had been forgiven! It almost broke her heart now to remember that he had never hurt her by a single reproachful word.

A sudden rain of tears would soon wash out the picture of the familiar firelit room. Uncle Carlo's handsome, kindly face and Bianca's shrivelled features were lost to sight again, and she was alone, save for the presence of a mocking demon who often came to her side, to remind her of all that which she most desired to forget.

Carmen was by no means blind to what was going forward about her. She knew that the pleasures which drew her husband abroad were not always of the harmless nature he would have her to suppose; she knew, too, that she, herself, was the theme of much pitying gossip, but she met the sympathising glances directed towards her with cold, unresponsive eyes. It was so much easier to pretend not to understand than to accept the rôle of the unloved, neglected wife.

When the name of Signora Ferrari—the latest Covent Garden star—was significantly mentioned in her presence, her face remained icily indifferent, not a quiver betraying the jealous pain at her heart. But in the solitude of

these long vigils the shield of pride was dropped, and she stood revealed in the merciless light of self-knowledge, a disappointed, heart-broken woman.

“And you gave up everything for this—four years of idle misery!” the demon was always by to whisper, and Carmen would pause in her restless pacing, struck anew by the futility of the sacrifice she had made for this man’s sake. Then her glance would wander towards the closed piano she had not dared to touch for months, and suddenly an intoxicating consciousness of power would rise to her head like wine. Whither would Signora Ferrari’s laurels vanish did she take her place for a single night? Uncle Carlo could answer that question. And he had always said, “You will come back. You cannot escape your destiny—most certainly you will come back.”

“You cannot escape your destiny!” The very air about her pulsed with the prophetic words, and, for a moment, temptation, alluring, all-powerful, blocked the horizon, filling her whole field of sight. For a moment only. Then, terrified, shame-stricken, she would rush upstairs to the nursery, where her child lay sleeping, oblivious of the storm in his mother’s heart.

“At least I have him,” she would cry, snatching the tiny sleeper to her breast,

against which, she felt with fear, he lay like a feather-weight. "O God, spare me my boy!"

III

One chilly evening of mid-spring husband and wife sat over their dessert in the sombre, richly-furnished dining-room of Sir Hugh McCrae's London house. The servants had withdrawn, and there being no further need for keeping up the conventional appearances, they had both relapsed into the silence of their own thoughts. Sir Hugh was the first to break the pause.

"Will you come to Lady Temple's reception to-night, Carmen?" he asked suddenly. "She particularly requested me to bring you," he went on a trifle hesitantly; "and I had to promise—she was so insistent. But you needn't stay beyond a couple of hours."

Sir Hugh looked considerably embarrassed, and his effort to speak in an easy, off-hand way only served to make his embarrassment more apparent. Carmen flashed a keen glance at him, and the colour suddenly left her cheeks. Then she smiled bitterly. These strange, unyouthful smiles were becoming habitual to her of late.

"I am afraid I must disappoint Lady Temple," she answered coldly. "Baby has been unwell all day, and nurse thinks he is a little

feverish to-night. I don't like leaving him even for a couple of hours. Of course I shall have Doctor Owen to see him if he isn't better in the morning."

Sir Hugh looked annoyed. The constitutional delicacy of his heir was a sore point with him: the McCraes had ever been a hardy race.

"I think you exaggerate every trifling ailment into something serious," he said peevishly. "And, anyhow, what can you do for him that nurse can't do just as well? It will seem odd to see me without you, after all Lady Temple said." His voice took a more querulous tone. "And everybody will be there to-night, which will make your absence more remarked. Signora Ferrari has promised to sing. It will be a rare treat."

"A rare treat," repeated Carmen mechanically. She was gazing at him fixedly, with an odd expression in her eyes. Something in her manner struck him as unusual. He began to fidget uneasily under her cold, penetrating scrutiny, half wishing he had not spoken at all. A meddling old fool, he called Lady Temple in his own mind, then paused on the words and frowned. A meddling old fool, perhaps, but also a great lady, socially and politically—a power that not even Sir Hugh McCrae, with all the prestige of his fortune and family position, could afford to disregard.

Hitherto he had always managed to keep on the safe side of her esteem, but latterly there had been some noticeable coldness on her part—something to do with Carmen he supposed. He threw his wife a glance of almost savage irritation, then, drawing a decanter towards him, poured out a glass of wine, and drained it at a draught.

Carmen noticed how the hand that held the glass trembled, and again the mocking smile came to her lips; but her heart tightened with a presentiment that something was about to happen, that a crisis in their lives was at hand. It may come to-night, she said to herself, rising with sudden decision, and leaning lightly forward across the flower-decked table.

“After all, I think I shall change my mind,” she said, with an air of playful resolution; “I really must hear your wonderful Signora Ferrari sing.”

As a hostess Lady Temple was unsurpassed. Her entertainments ranked among the most important functions of the social year, and to-night’s reception being the last of the season, was, if possible, more splendid than its predecessors. The spacious rooms of the fine old mansion in Piccadilly were filled with a glittering throng. Royalty was expected to put in an appearance, for Lady Temple was a high favourite at Court; and, meanwhile,

some of the most notable figures in London Society were present, besides a generous sprinkling of celebrities from many and divers worlds.

In the mild radiance of innumerable softly-toned lights jewels flashed and flamed, white shoulders gleamed, rich uniforms blazed; solemn-featured men discussed with grave gestures the problems of the hour; fashionable beauties held their courts; fair women moved about, gracious and glowing, like living flowers; stately dowagers trailed their sumptuous garments to and fro, shooting critical glances from group to group, and gossiping confidentially behind their fans. The air was heavily scented and very hot.

Carmen, from her seat behind a fat dowager, looked at the brilliant spectacle with weary eyes. She had seen all, heard all, that she wanted to see and hear. The prima donna had sung, not once, but several times to the plaudits of the fashionable crowd. At this moment she was whispering in a corner with Sir Hugh McCrae, making no pretence of screening their *tête-à-tête*, not daunted even by her hostess's cold, disapproving stare.

Carmen watched them with a pale smile, lying languidly back in her chair. The angry pain had quite left her heart now; it was as though all feeling in her was dead. Only the sense of fatigue. She felt tired, tired out, like

one who had reached the end of all things, whose one conscious craving is for rest. So must the very aged feel, she thought.

That she had not altogether attained to that happy state of insensibility she was, however, soon reminded by a thin voice, with a slight American drawl, which rose suddenly from somewhere in her vicinity, sounding distinctly above the general hum. Carmen sat upright, turning her head in the direction of the incautious speaker.

"Yes, indeed, he has brought his wife. One would almost think it was for the express purpose of insulting her," the thin voice said, and there was a quiver of indignation in it. "Poor child! One of the quiet, uncomplaining sort, you know. Not at all the right wife for him. The man needed keeping in order from the start. But, poor dear, she was so young. I really think somebody ought to interfere now. I will speak to Lady Temple about it. It's positively scandalous to see him flaunting his relations with that woman before his wife's very eyes."

There was a murmured reply which Carmen did not catch, for a wave of blood was surging madly about her temples with the sound of muffled drums. So it was of her these people were talking! She had to bear their half-contemptuous pity: that was the cruellest suffering of all. He might have spared her

that. She pressed her hands together, and her lips became a hard, livid line. Then the room seemed suddenly to reel about her, and all the moving figures floated away, turning round and round in a dizzy, fantastic dance. Could she be going to faint? The fear steadied her. She closed her eyes with a fierce effort at self-control. She must not break down before these people. If only for her child's sake, there must be no further scandal that she could prevent, no fresh food for malicious gossip to-morrow. Her child!—her little boy! The mere thought of the soft baby creature brought comfort with it, sent a rush of warm emotion through the frozen ways of her heart. She sat up, strengthened anew, just as a hand fell softly on her shoulder.

“You are wanted, dear Lady McCrae.” Lady Temple's kind face was full of compassion. “Your nurse has sent an urgent message. She thinks—I am afraid——”

“My boy is worse—he is dying,” interrupted Carmen, standing up hastily. “Lady Temple, will you be kind enough to order my carriage? I will go to him at once.”

Her voice was firm, her manner perfectly calm. Lady Temple might have thought her unfeeling, but for the dumb anguish of her eyes.

A few minutes later she was seated opposite her husband in the carriage, whirling home-

wards at racing speed through the dark, solitary streets.

The nurse met them in the hall. She was trembling and wringing her hands.

"He cried so pitifully after your Ladyship left—the poor sweet lamb!" she said tearfully. "And then, all of a sudden, he stiffened out, and for a moment I thought he was gone. I did what I could, of course, and I sent for your Ladyship and the doctor at once. The doctor is with him now."

"He cried for me, and I was not there!"

Carmen turned a white, terrible face on her husband, from which even his hard eyes shrank. But she looked away instantly to the now sobbing woman.

"Don't cry. It will do no good," she said, in a harsh, strained voice new to her hearers. Then, on the words, she moved swiftly away from them with an impatient wave of her hand, as if dismissing them from her thoughts. Her white figure flashed for an instant through the semi-gloom of the staircase; they could hear her rapid footsteps running along the corridor above.

Sir Hugh looked after her hesitantly, but he made no attempt to follow.

The dawn was breaking in watery grey gleams. A bar of pale light appeared suddenly at the top of the nursery window in the narrow space

between blind and sill. The neglected night-lamp was fluttering wildly, flinging weird trails of shadow across the pinched baby face, waxen-white against the snowy drapery of the cot. Carmen sat huddled into a heap beside the cot, with her arm flung out across the coverlet, above the little form that had always been so light. Its restless movements were stilled now at last; the tiny limbs were stretched out in rigid, unnatural repose. Through all Carmen's anguish there struggled a dim sense of joy: her baby was safe at rest.

"But he cried for me, and I was not there," she was still saying to herself over and over again, in a dull, aching monotone. "He wanted me, and I was not there!"

Nothing could ever alter that fact for her. It made everything appear trivial that had gone before.

The night-lamp, by and by, began to sputter noisily; under its hood of snuff the dying flame rose and fell. Carmen turned her head towards the window. She knew it must be clear dawn without, but silence still lay upon the household. Even the tired nurse had gone to sleep in the next room, her heavy breathing sounded through the half-open door.

Carmen's hand wavered a moment over the drawn face on the pillow, softly pressing the eyelids down on the glassy blue eyes that met her own haggard, tearless ones with their

innocent, wondering stare. She felt she was hushing him to rest for the last time—forever.

Then she stood up and drew the white curtains closely about the cot, and then went over to the chair on which her mantle lay, just as she had flung it down hastily a few hours before. She threw it on over her ball-dress, and stole softly out of the room. Her satin-shod feet made no sound on the thickly-carpeted stairs ; she reached the hall in safety, and noiselessly undid the fastenings of the door. When she opened the door, a stream of steel-blue light flowed into the hall. She paused for a moment on the threshold for a backward glance up the gloom of the twilit staircase, and her thoughts went further than her glance—to the silent room above. Then, pulling the door softly behind her, she went forth into the street.

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In the boudoir of a dainty flat overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens two women were seated. One was considerably past her prime ; the other was young still as years are counted, but life had already traced lines of suffering about her eyes and mouth ; there were threads of silver running through the wavy darkness of her hair.

A small tea-table was drawn close to the cheerful wood fire, and, while they sipped

their tea, they talked in desultory fashion, sometimes, with the freedom of old friendship, lapsing into long intervals of silence.

"You surpassed yourself last night," said the older woman, suddenly breaking a pause. "Your acting was almost as good as your singing, and that was—what shall I say?—superb. It was really wonderful to see the great packed house hushed into absolute stillness while you sang, and then breaking into thunderstorms of applause. I thought of Orpheus and his lute and many things besides, and listening to you, I no longer wondered that they call you 'the divine Carmen.' *She is* divine, I said to myself, and a little envy of you crept into my heart!"

"What nonsense!" Carmen smiled faintly. "Your pictures will outlast the memory of my poor songs. We singers sing but for a generation, then we pass away, and are soon forgotten."

"That may be true, but, while it lasts, I think you realise your success more fully, more intimately, than we can ever do. It is because, of course, you keep in closer touch with your public. For instance, from the moment you come on the stage, you feel yourself in the midst of friends. The consciousness of that must be stimulating. Don't you find it so?"

"I do, frequently, and last night it saved me from failure—the sort of stupid failure

Uncle Carlo would never be able to understand. This is what happened: I had been singing well—my very best—when, on a sudden I thought I heard a child crying somewhere, and that unnerved me. It might have been only a trick of fancy, but it sounded like the crying of a sick child. For a moment I felt myself on the verge of a breakdown, but the thought of all that I owed these kindly people who had flocked to hear me had a steadying effect. I looked at the rows and rows of friendly, expectant faces, and I was able to finish the song. Afterwards Uncle Carlo said I had never sung so well, so I had my reward.”

Her companion’s eyes rested on her anxiously.

“You have been overworking lately, I fear. Or, perhaps, you have been dwelling too much on the past.”

Carmen got up without answering, and went over to a bureau in the corner near the window. She stood before it for a few moments, absently fingering the papers with which it was strewn, then moved slowly back to her seat at the fire, an open letter in her hand.

“Rather an amusing thing has happened,” she said, with a complete change of voice. “You will hardly believe it, *ma chère*, but I have actually had a love-letter from my husband.” She touched the missive lightly, and a look of exceeding bitterness came into her

face. "It is a charming letter, quite lyrical, in fact, and I think the emotion is sincere. He says he loves me now as he never did in the old days, and he believes the past might be undone, and we could begin a new life together. But here is the letter. Read it, and judge for yourself."

The older woman perused the four closely-written pages in silence, then glanced curiously at her friend. It interested her to conjecture how Carmen would act in this new crisis of her life. Would love have the old power over that passionate nature? Would it obey the enchanter's call again? She was fascinated by the doubt.

"You loved him once," she murmured suggestively, handing back the letter.

"I loved him," said Carmen, rising and standing before the fire, the letter crushed into her palm. "God knows how I loved him! There was a time when the words he has written down there would have called me back from the dead."

There was a note of sombre energy in her voice, and her eyes lit up with a flash of their old fire.

The other smiled indulgently. She had not yet outlived the warm sympathies of her youth.

"Then your answer will be——"

A laugh interrupted the hesitating question.

Stooping suddenly, Carmen flung the crumpled letter on the top of the blazing logs. The flames caught it instantly. It flared up, burned fiercely for a moment, then shrivelled slowly into a blackened curl of ashes.

“That is my answer,” she said.

A Daughter of France

I

THE village street lay very still that afternoon under the yellow October sun. Scarcely a sound came from its low red-browed cottages, closed for the most part, with drawn shutters hiding the vine-wreathed latticed panes. Even the children—often declared by angry mothers to be the noisiest in all France—had dropped their usual rude games, and were playing quietly in a corner of the *Place*: building forts and ramparts out of the stones that had been collected earlier in the year for the repairing of the ancient Gothic church. Tower and bastion and castellated walls rose swiftly beneath the busy fingers, and stretched audaciously across the narrow street, for there was none by to say the children nay, and no traffic of wheels or passing feet to be feared—there was hardly a sign of life stirring in the village. Only a sleepy sow grunting contentedly as she stretched her hairy limbs in a patch of sunshine, and a greedy battalion of fowls scavenging among the refuse heaps, under the leadership of a stately cock in brave attire of green

and scarlet and gold. Now and then his shrill challenge rang out aggressively through the stillness, answered from near and far, in various keys, ranging from the loud clarion of a rival veteran to the piping note of the youngster just gaining courage from his budding crest and spurs.

"Yes, yes, no doubt you would be fighting too: all you males are the same," muttered a yellow-faced old crone crouching in an opposite doorway. Her eyes gleamed strangely as she spoke, and her colourless lips twitched spasmodically over the toothless gums. "Have done, now!" she threatened, shaking her fist at the belligerent cock, where he stood, with head erect, flapping his shining wings. But he tossed his red crown defiantly, and three times in quick succession his fierce challenge echoed down the street.

The old woman started and crossed herself, letting the sock she was knitting fall unheeded to her lap. For a moment she looked straight before her with the fixed stare of the somnambulist, then her shrivelled countenance quickened with an expression of fear and hate. Snatching up her knitting, she fell to work again, feverishly, as if goaded by the pressure of painful thoughts. To and fro, to and fro, like live things, the restless needles moved, the stitches flying away in swift procession from their glittering points; to and fro, to and fro,

while the sunshine flushed from gold to rose, and the whole world grew fair as a young maiden's cheek.

"There will be strangers here before many hours," muttered the old woman. "Where the cock crows thrice the stranger's foot follows."

She started again at the significance of her words, glancing expectantly from side to side; but the street still kept the forlorn aspect latterly familiar to it in the busy hours of the day. All who could work—and they were only the women and the older children now—were abroad in the fields early and late, for everything was behindhand since the messengers of war had swooped down upon the village and robbed it of the last of its strong-armed men. The green corn spears were only flowering when they went away. They marched out from the *Place* yonder at sunrise one morning to the stirring sounds of music and the merry beating of drums. Down this street between the rows of cheerful cottages, they went: the bearded man in his prime, the stripling straight from his mother's arms, her kiss still fresh on his girlish lips. Only the old and infirm were left to lament their impotence and the brave days that were gone.

The women of Moisy, dry-eyed, watched their men depart, holding up their babes to view the gallant sight. But they came of a

strenuous race, and the time was not yet for grief. France was in danger ! The foot of the invader was on her soil ; her armies were driven back, dispersed. Shame and anger raged in every heart ; the men went forth cursing loudly, while the women fiercely swallowed their tears. Moisy was only one of many villages from which the bread-winners had been taken without heed of the barren winter days and the hungry mouths to be filled.

The rose-flush faded out of the gold ; the evening sky grew grey and lifeless ; a ghostly troop of shadows came stealing along the street. Suddenly the door of one of the closed houses opened, and a tall girl in a black dress came out, swinging an earthenware pitcher in one hand. She stood for a moment looking about her with dazzled eyes as of one unused to much light, then setting the pitcher on her head, turned up the street, walking with a quick, graceful stride.

“ Good evening, Radégonde,” called out the prophetic old woman, nodding to her as she passed. “ And how does the poor *maman* get on ? I have not seen you since morning.”

“ She is no better, Mère Berthon,” answered the girl, and the young voice had a weary intonation expressive of long bedside vigils and sorrow growing to sickness of heart.

“ Ah, *mon Dieu*, it is trouble on all sides,” groaned the other, shaking her head till the

long gold ear-drops rattled against her withered cheeks. "And now, as if things were not bad enough, the Prussians are coming to Moisy. Do you hear that cock again? I tell you, Radégonde Gillin, they will be here before twenty-four hours."

The girl shrugged her fine shoulders indifferently, but the colour flashed into her cheeks.

"Let them come! I, for one, am not afraid; I am ready for them," she said, moving on with a sudden laugh.

At the top of the street she met the women coming back from the fields bending under the implements of their toil. A few of them had been beating clothes at the pond, and these balanced heavy baskets of washed linen on their heads.

"Mère Berthon says the Prussians are coming," Radégonde cried, addressing the foremost figures. "It may be naught but her fancy; yet if they should come, how are we going to receive them, women of Moisy?"

"Softly, Radégonde!" remonstrated a grave looking matron in black. "What can a handful of helpless women do in the face of armed men?"

"Do! I have lost my father and my only brother in a single battle; my sweetheart is at Metz under fire of the Prussian guns—I am made of flesh and blood, not stone: I, at

least, shall know what to do when the time comes."

There was deadly, unmistakable meaning in the simple-sounding words. The women looked at each other half stupidly, half in alarm. Then, speaking for the others, one said:

"We all have cruel losses to count, Radégonde; on every heart the stroke has fallen. And we would all strike back willingly if we could. But—we are only women."

"But that is just why we can strike," exclaimed Radégonde vehemently. "Remember, they will live in our houses, and eat at our tables, and sleep in our beds. And they will have no fear of us because we are only women. I tell you the game is in our hands. Let Moisy but set the example, every town and village in France will follow."

Her voice rose high, vibrating with passion like a trumpet-call to battle. Again the women silently exchanged glances. They were tired out after their long day's work and in no mood for this fiery talk. One of them shook her head mournfully, but not disapprovingly. She had lost her only son at Gravelotte, and her husband, too, was at this moment shut up with Bazaine in Metz. She might be a widow to-morrow for all she knew; then, sure enough, revenge would be very sweet. Meantime, why go forward to meet fresh sorrow?

"We shall see when the time comes, Radégonde," she said. "At present talk of this sort is foolish. And it is not always the talkers who do most. Your courage may be the first to fail, for all your brave words."

She moved on as she spoke, the other women with her, smiling at Radégonde's supposed discomfiture, but the girl's scornful laugh followed them down the street.

II

On the following morning at daybreak the inhabitants of Moisy were startled out of their sleep by strange and sinister sounds. At first they heard but a hoarse murmur like the distant voice of the sea. Then the confused noise drew nearer, and then through the silence of the dawn came, on a sudden, the neighing and trampling of horses, the rattling of swords and the clink of spurs: in what seemed one moment the village was full of armed men.

Radégonde Gillin was one of the first to spring from her bed, but she did not open the door, nor even cast a glance through the window, though she heard cries of "*Les Prussiens!*" on every side. She was bending over the stove, quietly preparing her invalid mother's breakfast when the door behind her opened, and looking round, she beheld two men standing on the threshold. One was evi-

dently wounded. His head was bandaged with a blood-stained linen cloth ; his right arm rested in a sling, and he leaned on his companion for support. The latter was a tall man in the uniform of a Prussian sergeant. Radégonde glanced at his epaulets, then coldly averted her eyes.

"You are quartered on us, I suppose," she said, and her tone was as indifferent as her face. "It is unfortunate, monsieur, for the house is, as you see, small, and my mother is too ill to be shifted from her room ; else she would give it up to you, of course. The only one I have to offer you now is no better than a *grenier*."

The soldier pulled off his cap and stood bareheaded before her. She bent her head in acknowledgment of his courtesy, but a dark flush rose to her cheeks, and a strange red glint came into her sombre eyes.

The soldier noted her emotion without heeding its cause ; he only thought that, with that flush in her brown cheeks, that flame in her big dark eyes, she was the most superbly beautiful woman he had ever seen. A little colour came into his own bronzed skin, as he stood there still bareheaded before her.

"We are only rough soldiers, mademoiselle," he answered simply ; "the room will do well enough. And now I am going to take my *camarade* to have his wound dressed. We shall be with you again presently."

He spoke in excellent French that surprised the girl. "These Prussians can do everything well," was her bitter thought, and her eyes followed them with a look of gloomy hatred as they went away together, the wounded man supported by his comrade's arm.

A couple of hours later the big dragoon came back alone. Radégonde was busying herself with preparations for the midday meal when he came clanking into the kitchen.

"We have turned the schoolhouse into a hospital," he explained ; "for, unhappily, there are some sick and wounded among us. My comrade has been taken in with the other bad cases ; he is delirious now, poor fellow. Well, that makes one less to trouble you," he added, smiling whimsically, but with a quick glance of sympathy at her pale, tired face. "As for me, mademoiselle, I shall be as little in your way as possible."

The girl, while he was speaking, kept her gaze sedulously fixed on the potatoes she was peeling, but she was nevertheless acutely sensitive to the singular charm of his voice. It possessed a rare quality of melodious cheerfulness, inspiring to the ear as the first brisk sounds of the morning after a sleepless night. In one moment, it seemed to Radégonde, the sluggish silence of the room was filled with the energy and the joy of life.

Despite her strong repulsion, the voice drew

her. She turned her head in his direction, raising eyes of sullen wonder to his face. He stood between her and the sunlight, his massive figure upright as a dart. And her scrutiny grew from cold astonishment to searching vigilance as it lingered on the splendid proportions of his stalwart frame, every line of which was cast in the mould of strength. Then her eyes travelled slowly to the fair open countenance, noting the square lines of the jaw, the extreme sweetness of the firmly-curved mouth.

"Were you at Gravelotte?" she asked abruptly, and this time her ear detected the strange note in her voice.

"Yes, mademoiselle. I fought by my father's side that day," he answered after a moment's pause.

"I lost my father and my brother in that one battle," she said, glancing up at him again, this time fiercely from under bent brows. At that moment she detested his massive beauty: it stood for a symbol of his country's arrogant strength. And she hated, too, his jingling spurs and the sword that clanked against his side every time he moved. Something like a shudder went through her when he spoke again.

"I left my father on the field of Gravelotte," he said slowly, in a voice deep with sadness. "It has been, you see, a fatal day to us both, mademoiselle. Perhaps that knowledge will

enable you to bear with my presence for a short while, and to pardon my intrusion: it has been unintentional, and it cannot last for long."

Radégonde bent more closely over her work while she murmured an inarticulate reply. Despite herself, the frank kindness of the enemy disarmed her. She felt, somehow, baffled, defeated; she could not meet his honest eyes.

The Prussian dined alone at midday, Radégonde waiting on him, unmindful of his protests. But the same feeling that had caused her to turn away from him earlier made it impossible for her now to eat at the same board. She chid herself for this unsuspected weakness. "He will begin to distrust me," she thought. "To-night I must put on a different face." And while she busied herself in ministering to his comfort, she strove to steel her heart against his genial youth and the tenderness she divined underlying his great strength.

"He is so much the more dangerous," was her thought. "It is on men like him the fate of battles depends."

After he had gone out she went over to a cupboard that stood against the wall opposite the fire. It was a fine old Norman cupboard, brought from Rouen by her grandfather, himself a Norman, and greatly treasured by him as a relic of more prosperous days. Here were

stored all the best glass and china, and on a shelf in the middle a number of medicine bottles were neatly arranged in a row. Conspicuous among them by its smallness was a tiny blue phial. She took it down from its place on the shelf, examined it a moment and smiled. "Time for *petite mère* to have her dose," she said, beginning to count a few drops of its contents into a wine-glass, but her hand shook and the liquid was spilled. She had to empty the glass and begin to count the drops over again, this time very slowly until the requisite number was reached.

"A few drops too many would deal death, not healing: one cannot be too careful," she muttered, and again she smiled. It was well the frank-eyed German did not see Radégonde's smile.

He kept out of her way till supper time, and when she summoned him to the meal took his place awkwardly enough at the table. But by this time Radégonde's mood had changed. She seated herself opposite him, dipping the ladle in the soup with a pleasant smile. Her air of hospitality at once thawed his growing reserve, and seeing her inclined for conversation, the good-natured fellow was quite ready to meet her advances half-way. So they fell to talking, a little stiffly at first, but soon with the ease of friends.

He told her about his home in a valley of

the Moselle, where the river winds about the vine-clad hills with many a stately curve and many a petulant bend, here and there folding to itself a rugged *schloss* of mediaeval grandeur, a sleepy town dreaming under the shadow of its pointed steeples, or a world-forgotten village still retaining the quaintness of its old-time charm. Then, his narrative insensibly growing more intimate, he spoke of the father he had just lost—fighting for his country, he proudly said, his face lighting up at the thought: a man of stern exterior, but tender-hearted as the tenderest of women—his voice choked on the words. And then, while it fell on a softer note, he told her of his mother, the beautiful calm-eyed matron whom he and his father had always regarded with a wondering, Madonna-like worship as a being formed of other elements than their coarse human clay.

“And you are all she has left?” questioned his listener in a curious muffled tone.

“Oh, no, there is still little Gretchen,” was the answer, and seeing interest quickening in the pale face opposite, he began to describe the little blue-eyed sister, still too young to be fully conscious of the real meaning of war, who took her knitting into the porch every evening at twilight to watch for her soldier-brother’s return.

“And if you never return?” said Radégonde, looking at him steadily as she spoke.

There was a hard suggestion in the soft, youthful voice, but utterly misinterpreting its meaning, the simple-minded German smiled.

"If not, they will at least know I, too, have tried to do my duty, mademoiselle," he replied with quiet dignity, and once more she felt rebuked; before the frank sincerity of his countenance her fixed regard slowly fell.

"It is something to have done one's duty," she muttered. "It is the best, the only thing, after all."

There was silence for a few minutes, then the German began to speak again, and, little by little, slowly and reluctantly, the charm of his voice reasserted itself, and the smile came back to Radégonde's clouded face. Infected, in spite of herself, by his example, speech came readily to her too, and as his eyes solicited her confidence she soon found herself telling him all there was to know about her short past life. He heard of the orders which had reached the quiet village, orders which none durst disobey, and of the men who had tramped forth at day-break, most of them never to return. Of the dead father and brother she spoke freely and feelingly, but of the absent sweetheart who was to have been her husband at Michaelmas, she said never a word.

They were still talking when the clock above the mantelpiece struck ten. Radégonde rose to her feet with a start.

"*Petite mère* will be wondering what is keeping me," she said. "I pray you to excuse me; I must go to her at once." And hastening away on the words, with a shamefaced air, she ran up the stairs to the floor above.

The German rose more leisurely.

"She is adorable," he said.

Long after he had gone to rest himself, he could hear her light step moving incessantly about the next room, and her voice, in patient accents, answering the peevish murmurs that had not ceased when his eyes closed suddenly, and he dropped into the soldier's dreamless sleep.

Radégonde, too, slept heavily after a day crowded with emotions. It was somewhat later than usual, when, roused by her mother's querulous voice, she got up, dressed hastily and descended to the kitchen. Here a surprise awaited her. The floor was freshly swept, the stone pitcher filled with water, and a heap of chopped wood lay ready for use in a corner. Bowls and plates were set out on the table for the early breakfast, and a *cafetière* was steaming before the blazing fire of the hearth. She had only to make the coffee now, and the meal was ready.

Radégonde looked round the orderly room with astonishment approaching dismay. Then she felt her throat tighten suddenly, and two large tears welled into her eyes. Bred to hard

work, as she was, this was her first experience of the little unobtrusive kindnesses that, just because they are so trivial, make most appeal to a woman's heart. Her father and brother had been selfish and easy-going, pleasant enough to live with when things went well. They were far from ill-natured, however; only careless, and there was always Radégonde ready to minister to their wants. Up and down, in and out, the little figure moved from morning until night, and nobody—not even the bedridden mother on whom she waited unceasingly—thought the nimble feet could be tired. The lover who was shortly to have been her husband took no more heed of her than the others; he never noticed the paleness of her cheek, the weary droop of her shoulders when the day's tasks were done. And now one had come into her life—a stranger, nay, an enemy—who with one glance of his keen eyes had seen it all, and set himself to lighten the burden none had thought of sharing before. Radégonde's cheeks burned with the knowledge of her indebtedness to the hated Prussian, but a strong sense of gratitude rose higher than her wrath.

“I will tell him I cannot accept such service from him,” she said, but, for all that, there was an unwonted feeling of warmth in her heart.

III

The days thenceforth went by uncounted, and the soft glow of comfort more and more diffused itself through Radégonde's life. In the beginning she had made an effort to check the Prussian's friendly overtures, but he was not to be snubbed by a few curt words. And it was such a new experience to be considered and cared for that, after a while the novelty of it overcame her scruples, and she yielded her whole being to the atmosphere of wordless kindness which enveloped her as in a soft perpetual embrace. It came to be regarded as a matter of course that he should share her daily duties, even take her place by the sick mother, whom no kindness could conciliate, whenever the girl had to go out of doors. But he had his reward later : there was the long delightful evening, the intimate chat in the dim firelight, when Radégonde's knitting lay unheeded on her lap, and she was content to sit empty-handed, listening idly to his voice.

A whole fortnight passed thus, and still the German troops occupied the village. They were, for the most part, good-natured fellows, ready to fetch and carry for the mothers or play with the children who had grown quite used to their strange guttural speech and the clanking of their heavy swords. But despite

the outward friendliness of their relations, the women still eyed them askance.

"Will they never go?" they asked one another angrily, for food and fodder were becoming scarce, and there was the long winter to be faced when both would be scarcer still, and the children might cry in vain for bread.

The soldiers themselves were impatient of their inactivity, and full as eager to be gone as their hosts could be to see them depart.

"We are only waiting for instructions," the sergeant explained to Radégonde; "but soon—any day—our marching orders will come."

"There are some will grieve sorely when they go," said a woman's sarcastic voice, and the speaker passed on with a sly glance of malice at Radégonde's open window.

The girl inside heard and understood the meaning of look and words. She drew back from the window blushing furiously, then the momentary colour faded, and she turned deadly white. She stood for an instant in the centre of the room with both hands pressed tightly against her heart.

"To think that of me! To dare to think it of me!" she muttered, the hot colour once more flaring into her cheeks.

The cupboard in which the medicine bottles were stored stood at the wall next the window. An impulse of the passion burning in her face

sent her forward to it ; she opened the door with a flash of resolution lighting up the dark misery of her eyes. At that moment a cheery voice sounded without ; there was the sharp clink of spurs on the cobble stones beneath the window. Radégonde started, and the hand she had raised grew suddenly rigid, then fell helplessly to her side. A shiver went through her body, creeping slowly from head to feet. She lifted her hand a second time and now with no uncertain movement, and shut the cupboard door with a bang.

IV

There came a day when Radégonde sat crouching in a corner of the kitchen, with a hunted look in her face. Three times had her mother called her, yet she did not rise from her chair. She felt she could not meet her mother's eye, she could not bear even the searching sunlight that flowed into the room.

Without, there was the chattering of women's voices in an unusually lively key. For the hated Germans were going at last, and already a burden seemed lifting from the village ; even the children who had been their playfellows felt the freer atmosphere and openly rejoiced.

Radégonde had heard the news from her guest the previous night. He came in hastily

as she was laying the supper-table, and going up to her, took her hand.

"We are leaving Moisy, Radégonde," he said; "the orders have just come. The day after to-morrow we are to march from here."

"Whither?" she asked in a strained whisper, and it was with an angry sense of weakness she felt the blood leaving her heart.

"To Metz," he said briefly, dropping her hand as she recoiled from him; then, with a simultaneous impulse, they moved apart. They exchanged few words afterwards. The soldier went out immediately supper was over, and had not returned when Radégonde, tired of waiting, climbed the stairs wearily to her mother's room.

Fortunately the invalid was asleep when she entered, but sleep did not come readily to her own eyes. She sat on the side of her bed, wakeful and watchful, counting the long minutes as they passed. Then at last the front door opened and a cautious step was heard moving about below. The step approached after a short interval, ascending the stairs slowly and fearfully, as if dreading to make a sound. That was like him, Radégonde thought, always regardful of others, unlike the men she had been used to, whose noisy tread at any hour of the day or night would have shaken the little house to its foundations. She heard him go into his room and shut the door very softly, but she did

not stir. She sat quite still, looking straight before her in wide-eyed misery while the moon waned in the darkling sky and the stars died out one by one.

The room lay in shadow now, only the unshuttered window making a square patch of grey against the gloom. It was the breathless hour before dawn, when nature sinks in profounder slumber and there is no movement to awake her, not even the soft rustling of plumage, for no winged things are yet abroad. The silence was inexpressibly soothing. Radégonde's riotous pulse began to beat more calmly, her clouded vision grew clear. It was as though she were stepping from behind a mist.

In the daytime, under the sunshine, we may cheat ourselves with fair-sounding phrases, but night is inexorable as death. In the still darkness of that solemn hour the eyes of her soul were opened, and she saw the naked secrets of her heart. It was too late now to feign unconsciousness; she knew what had befallen. She knew that she, Radégonde Gillin, had so far slipped from the common standard of truth and honour that already her feet were pointed towards the abyss. And for her there was no pardon, not even the pity of excuse. She had moved as another Miriam among the women, kindling their courage to heroic action in fierce words tipped with fire; yet she had, herself, been the first to fall away from her own high

precepts, in one blind hour forgetting the claims of principle and duty and the clamorous call of race. Henceforth her proud head might well droop low among the lowest. Were her father living now, he would surely disown his child. For she was a traitress—she who had meant to be as a beacon to the others ; she had given her heart and her soul and her being to the keeping of this red-handed stranger, coming to her straight from a battle in which the blood of her dearest had been spilled.

Then a voice spoke from out the darkness : “Why all this shame and self-upbraiding ? This man was worthy of any woman’s worship : why not give him love for love ? Surely, being true himself, it was all he sought.”

“He is the enemy of my country,” she answered sadly. “Even for him I cannot forswear my own kindred.” And again her soul grew sick with despair.

“But I love him ; for all that I love him,” she exclaimed the next moment almost exultantly, repeating the words over and over again with a certain fierce pleasure in their sound. “I love him,” she cried aloud to the darkness, joy rising for a moment, and beating down the shame of her avowal. For she was not altogether false, however others might judge her. By the heat and strength of this new emotion she knew she had never really loved before.

The soldier now shut up in Metz was her cousin. They had been betrothed since childhood by their parents, who regarded the matter as a mere business arrangement satisfactorily settling a disputed claim to some land. Neither François nor she had ever thought of questioning their elders' wishes. They liked one another well enough, though they quarrelled incessantly and had not a thought in common. Now, contrary to her previous experience, the image of François evoked a distinctly disagreeable impression in her mind. She saw him, perhaps, more clearly than she had done before. And she saw him selfish and exacting even as a cousin; as a lover, careless and indifferent, with no touch of chivalrous feeling for the woman who was to be his wife. Radégonde moaned aloud in her misery. Why did God give souls to women if they were only meant as tools for the purpose of the stronger? Why did He let such things be?

Day broke at last, driving the night before it, and there was relief in the renewed vigour of morning, and in the fresh air blowing through the close room. Radégonde forgot her trouble for awhile, but when the morning's work was over, the thoughts of the previous night trooped back and sternly faced her again.

For the first time in a fortnight her pitcher had been unfilled that morning and she had had to go to the well herself. There were

others there before her—a knot of sad-eyed women who conversed in low voices that suddenly dropped to a whisper when they saw her drawing near. She read bad news in their faces, but she passed on with a curt nod. It was easy to perceive they distrusted her; her eyes fell before their sidelong, suspicious glances, and a pang of fresh shame and sorrow went through her heart. Passing them again, when she had filled her pitcher, she could not refrain from pausing, so great had become her longing for the sound of a friendly voice.

“They are going,” she said inconsequently, in dull, strange accents. She shifted the pitcher on her head restlessly as she spoke.

The women regarded her curiously. Perhaps grief had wrought changes in them too, for, on a sudden, their hard looks softened.

“We have had bad news, Radégonde,” one of them said almost gently, unheeding the girl’s remark. “I think there is a curse on the country, for one hears of nothing but loss and defeat on every side. There are even rumours going about Bazaine. Pray God they may not be true! for there is scarce a woman here who has not half her heart in Metz.”

“All the spirit is gone out of France,” said another voice. “It appears the men run like hares before the Prussian guns. It would need another Jeanne d’Arc, I think, to put some of her own courage into them now.”

“ You are quite wrong, Marthe ; the leaders are alone to blame,” protested another woman. “ The men do but follow. Meanwhile, the Germans carry all before them. They talk little, but they act. We are far too fond of talking, we others, too wont to be content with boastful words.” And, whether by chance or design, her eyes sought Radégonde’s face. They bore a look of sarcastic meaning before which the girl visibly blenched.

“ We shall be still talking of all the fine things we mean to do when the Prussians are entering Paris—that is our way,” exclaimed a fourth, with a laugh in which the women joined, but their laughter was wild and hysterical ; they only laughed because they would not weep.

Radégonde turned away from the well, her tongue refusing speech, and the eyes of the others went with her wistfully as she went. Perhaps at that moment she appeared to them as a type of their country’s fortune—a fine thing marked for ruin.

When midday came the Prussian hurriedly swallowed a mouthful of food, standing, Radégonde standing beside him and serving him with averted face. As he moved to go, however, he felt her eyes upon him, and turning round suddenly their glances for one instant crossed.

“ Radégonde,” he whispered, taking a step towards her ; she felt driven forward by an

impelling impulse, and their outstretched hands met. He opened his arms involuntarily, and for a full minute she lay quietly against his heart.

"I am yours, and you are mine, Radégonde," he said solemnly. "We belong to each other now, whatever may befall."

The words had a sacramental significance for both. Radégonde remained silent awhile, looking at him with a countenance of infinite sorrow. But the Prussian's handsome features were radiant; he, at least, was not afraid to own his love. With a sudden realisation of the difference that divided them, Radégonde slowly disengaged herself from his embrace. Her brow was grown stormy, her deep eyes full of gloom.

"You are going to Metz," she said in a thick voice. "Your armies are ringing Bazaine round with steel."

"I am going where my duty calls me, Radégonde," he answered simply. "And if I fall, your name will be one of the last words on my lips."

The girl stood speechless, her chest heaving painfully; then her eyes lit up with a swift intelligent flash.

"It is men like you that turn the tide of battles," she said, following a former train of thought. "I wish to God you were one of us, Franz Muller, or that I had never seen your face."

V

Radégonde was a being full of surprises. When the Prussian entered in the evening, doubtful of his reception after her last words, and dreading the injustice of her reproaches, she advanced to meet him with a smiling face. No trace of the day's conflict remained to tell him of what had passed during his absence. Her brow was clear, there was a soft colour in her cheeks, and her eyes were unusually bright. She was dressed, too, in her blue Sunday frock, and there was a blue ribbon in her hair. It seemed to him that he had never yet seen her so beautiful, and, looking at her, his heart grew hot in his breast. She loved him, despite the feud between their two countries; her eyes told him the truth. It was love for love now, and when the war fever cooled she would forget he had ever stood in the ranks of her country's foes. They would leave the past far behind them; the future would be all their own. His pulses bounded at the thought.

"To-morrow we part, Radégonde," he said. "Let me hear you say to-night you love me; I will carry your words away with me, wherever I go." And he would have taken her in his arms.

But Radégonde slipped hastily out of his reach.

"To-morrow I will say anything you wish," she answered. "To-night we will make believe you are not going at all. See, I have made a little feast in your honour," and she pointed to the table, which was spread with more than ordinary care. "I have taken out a bottle of grandfather's wine," she went on. "We will drink to one another in it. It is very old, and I know it is good. There is but another bottle left."

She was already helping the soup while she was speaking, and the plate as she passed it to him shook strangely in her hand. But the simple-hearted fellow did not perceive her agitation, and the meal passed gaily enough. Radégonde talked unceasingly; her spirits had never been so high as to-night. Whenever he spoke of the morrow she hushed the words on his lips.

"We have the present, and nothing can take it from us. Let us be happy, then, for this hour," she cried with a laugh, while the light in her eyes burned more feverishly, and the pink turned to scarlet in her cheeks.

"Now I will pledge you in this wine," she said at length, touching the dusty bottle beside her. "It is French wine, of course—we have no other here; but surely its taste will not be bitter in your mouth for that, since you love a daughter of France. But we must have clean glasses—those crystal ones yonder."

And, rising, she went over to the cupboard. She flung the door open, then turned towards him with a listening air.

“Hark! Is not that my mother calling?”

The soldier sprang to his feet, and she winced as his sword clanked noisily against the tiled floor.

“I will see what she wants; you are tired, *Liebchen*,” he said, hastening to the door. There he paused to look back at her, tenderly and pityingly, for his ear had learned to detect the weary note in her voice. Radégonde grew deadly white as her eyes encountered his bright regard.

“Franz—come back!” She strove to call him, but her voice scarcely rose above a whisper, and he was already half-way up the stairs. Then: “This is fate!” she thought, and her features hardened; her curved brows met in a straight dark line. But her heart was beating as though it would rise up in her throat and choke her. She tried in vain to still its dull, hammer-like throbbing, then struck it angrily with her clenched hand. A moment longer she wavered irresolutely, then her right hand went up to the cupboard, and with a quick, stealthy movement withdrew a small blue phial from the shelf. She held it up to the light, regarding it critically, an awful smile glimmering through the corpse-like pallor of her face. Then she took down two tall crystal glasses, and, return-

ing with them to the table, set one beside the Prussian's place, the other at her own. Her bosom was heaving still more tumultuously, her breath coming in hoarse pants. She paused for a moment, seeking to command herself, the phial in her hand. Then a movement overhead startled her into sudden action. She pulled the stopper out of the phial as a step sounded at the door of her mother's room.

"For France!" she muttered thickly, the paleness of her countenance growing livid. "Now, Radégonde Gillin, be strong!"

The door of the room opened above, a quick tread fell on the stairs.

"For France!" she repeated, and raising the phial, poured every drop of its contents into the Prussian's glass.

When he re-entered the room, two fresh glasses stood on the table, and both were full of wine.

"The mother does not need you just yet, Radégonde," he said; "I think she is going to sleep. And I feel very grateful to her," he added cheerily, "for I want you all to myself a little longer."

His ready smile, which had taken a shade of wistfulness, came with the last words; but it faded instantly as a glance at the girl showed him the lifeless hue of her countenance, the dumb anguish in her eyes.

"You are ill, beloved," he cried, startled,

stretching out his hand to her ; but Radégonde waved him aside.

“ No, no ; not ill at all,” she answered, impatiently. “ And let us not talk of illness or of anything painful now. Let this be a moment of joy. See, I have filled our glasses. This is yours ”—she held the bumper towards him. “ To-night we will drink together for the last time. Hush ! I can guess what you would say. But remember the drawn sword between our countries ; remember we stand under separate flags. I own I have been a traitress to my country,” she added, with bitter vehemence, “ and my treason has led me very far. For I love you, Franz Muller—you, standing there in your Prussian uniform—I swear I love you better than my own soul ! When I filled that drink for you a moment ago I longed to swallow it and die. I swear it was not only wine I poured out, but every drop of my heart’s blood.”

Her air was so wild, her voice so shaken with agony, that the man shivered suddenly as though a cold wind had passed, but the next moment he had drawn closer, laughing and looking tenderly into her eyes.

“ You distress yourself unreasonably, *Liebchen*,” he said soothingly. “ We are not traitors—neither you nor I. And there is no reason why we should say farewell. The present will not be always. By and by we

shall have peace, and then I will come back to claim you. And there will no longer be separate flags above us, for our two lives shall be one. I drink to that day, Radégonde."

He touched his glass against the brim of hers, and the meeting crystals clinked ; then, bowing to her courteously, he raised the wine to his lips.

At that moment a cry burst from Radégonde, a cry so terrible that it seemed to gather the whole of life's agony into one piercing note. As the man recoiled in terror she flung herself upon him like a wild thing and snatched the glass out of his hand. Before he could realise what was happening the glass was at her own mouth.

"I drink to you," she said, and her face was lit up strangely. Then she drained the wine at a single draught.

They stood confronting each other a moment in silence. She had moved a few steps away, but he did not follow. Fear and horror were growing in his heart.

"Radégonde, what does this mean?" he asked, unable to keep the hoarse tremor out of his voice.

She looked at him in a curious puzzled way, leaning heavily against the table. Her lips moved, but no words came. The effort to speak ended in a pitiful, wavering smile. Then she

swayed suddenly, clutching weakly at the table. He sprang forward and caught the swaying figure that sank heavily into his arms.

“ Franz—I tried—but—I could not—
Franz—— ! ”

The eyes still seeking his grew strangely fixed, and a look of solemn peace descended on the stormy face.

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